

English Literature

**An Introduction for
Foreign Readers**

R. J. Rees

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Preface

This book is intended chiefly for those readers to whom English is a foreign language. I have therefore tried to write as simply as possible without using a vocabulary so reduced as to appear odd to those whose mother tongue is English. Indeed I hope that English students, as well as friends from other countries, will find this book readable, and useful as an introduction to the literature of Britain.

The plan of this book is similar to the one I have followed in my *Introduction to English Literature* (Macmillan, 1966), and I have used some of the same material. However references to Greek and Latin literature have been generally excluded, and more attention has been paid to modern writers.

I hope the foreign reader will not think that he ought to read this book carefully from beginning to end in a few days, or even weeks. The best way for him to use it is to read the parts that interest him at any given time, and then to put the book away to be returned to when his interests have changed. If the reader wants information about a particular writer he will probably be able to find it by using the index. Of course I have not been able to include *every* well-known English writer, but I have tried to mention the most important ones.

Since it may be difficult for the foreign reader to obtain as many English books as he would like, I have given as many examples and extracts as possible, including a number of complete poems. I am very grateful to the authors (and their agents or publishers) who have given permission for me to do this. I am also grateful to Miss Ann Hoffmann of Authors' Research Services for compiling the index, and to the editorial staff of Macmillan Education for helping me with good advice and for correcting my mistakes. For the mistakes which remain, the blame is entirely mine.

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CHAPTER ONE

Why We Study Literature

The study of science has become so important in the modern world that we sometimes find ourselves wondering whether other studies are not a waste of time. No knowledge of Greek or Latin literature for example will help us to feed millions of hungry children in Bengal, or to lighten the sufferings in our great cities of people who are old and poor and sick. No reading of poems and plays and novels (many of them written hundreds of years ago) will save the life of a single soldier on the world's latest battlefield. It is quite right that the student of the arts, and in particular the student of literature, should ask himself the difficult question, what use is it? There are many possible answers, and I shall try to set out a few of them in this chapter. First however let us think about an equally difficult question, what is literature?

In English we use the word in at least two different ways. Very often it simply means anything that is written: time-tables, catalogues, text-books, travel brochures and so on. If you are thinking of buying a bicycle or a motor car or a washing machine, you will probably want to see the literature about it. If you are a medical student you will have to read the literature about surgery. In this broad sense an account of yesterday's football match or an advertisement for soap powder is as much literature as the *Dialogues* of Plato or the novels of Graham Greene. But when we talk about English literature as we do in this book we are using the word in a different, and perhaps more serious, sense. Let us try to define it more carefully.

We shall start by comparing two pieces of writing about London. The first is taken from a popular encyclopaedia:

London: capital city of England and a port on the River Thames. It includes twenty-eight metropolitan boroughs. It is a cultural and industrial centre, and an important centre of international trade and finance. It has a university and many buildings of historic importance, including the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral, and the Tower of London.

The population of Greater London in 1961 was eight million, one hundred and seventy-one thousand, nine hundred and two.

Let us compare this with a very different piece of writing about London—Wordsworth's famous sonnet *Upon Westminster Bridge*, written early in the nineteenth century:

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This city now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

We shall forget for a moment that one piece is prose and the other verse: much more important is the difference in purpose. The writer in the encyclopaedia had a very simple purpose, which was to give us as many facts about London as he could in a small space. He did not want to tell us about himself or his feelings, or to make us feel any particular emotion about London. Wordsworth's purpose was quite different. He wanted to communicate feelings, not facts; emotion, not information. The sudden intense pleasure he felt in the beauty of the man-made landscape, and the strange silence of a city not yet awake, was too good to keep to himself. He wanted the reader to feel what he felt, just as you or I, seeing some magnificent building or splendid landscape, might be moved to exclaim, 'Look! Isn't that wonderful?' The piece from the encyclopaedia might be called literature in the broad sense I have mentioned (anything written); but the sense in which critics or students, the sort of people likely to be reading this book, will understand the word.

Literature, we may now agree, is writing which expresses and communicates thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards life. But

(someone may say) what about advertisements? What about the travel booklet that urges us to spend our holiday in 'colourful, swinging London—the world's liveliest city, where all the girls are dolly-girls and the most fashionable men turn out to be dukes and lords with roots deep in Old England's history?' This certainly seems to be expressing thoughts and feelings and attitudes; yet it is not literature in the sense in which we have now decided to use the word. This, I think, is because it lacks one of the qualities that make serious literature—the kind we are thinking about in this book—so different from advertising or journalism. The quality I have in mind is permanence.

The journalist (who is often a writer of great brilliance) writes pieces to be read tomorrow or next week, not a hundred or a thousand years from now. He might be worried at the thought of people reading them even a year or two later for he knows that there is nothing so dead as an old newspaper with its forgotten personalities and old-fashioned views of the world. The advertisement-writer, like the journalist, is concerned only with the people of his own time. It is they, not their great-grandchildren, who must be persuaded to eat Mr X's potato crisps or vote for Mr Y's Progressive Democratic Party. He would be unhappy to think of his work, which now seems so up to date, being read in future years, when the motor car or the movie-camera which is the subject of his present enthusiasm has become sadly, or even comically, out of date. The novelist, on the other hand, or the poet, hopes that his work will be permanent. It is true that some modern writers (and a number of modern painters and sculptors) talk about disposable art—that is to say art or literature which is intended to be destroyed and forgotten. Most writers however still want their work to last for future generations. The most hopeful of them indeed aim at nothing less than immortality for themselves and those they write about.

Shakespeare, in one of those sonnets which he addressed to a mysterious young man-friend, had this to say about the permanence of poetry and the way it can give a kind of immortality both to the writer and his subject:

...But thy eternal Summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

The Roman poet Catullus (about 87–54 B.C.) wrote a charming little poem on the death of a sparrow which his girl-friend Lesbia kept as a pet. The poem is still very much alive, and both Lesbia and her sparrow remain as real in the minds of modern readers as they were in the minds of Catullus's friends. But most writers, however much they long for permanence or immortality, fail to achieve it. There were plenty of good dramatists working at the same time as Shakespeare, but most of them are now forgotten except by a few scholars and research students; and no one can say which of the contemporary English writers will be remembered in the year 2070. Future readers may decide that the greatest poetry of the twentieth century is not to be found in the work of T. S. Eliot but in the lyrics of the Beatles. Time indeed can make some critics look very foolish; and one is astonished at the self-confidence of those who do not hesitate to place authors in classes and grades as though they were high-school pupils. None of us can say of course whether a work of literature is going to be permanent or not; but the fact that its author intended it to be permanent is, I think, one thing that marks it off from things like journalism, advertising, and even works of information. Such things are 'here today and gone tomorrow' but literature is intended to last.

To define literature is a difficult task which we do not need to attempt: yet it is generally easy to recognise literature when we come across it. In the same way it might be very difficult to define or describe a dog, but not at all difficult to recognise a dog when we see one. The shapes of literature are as various as the shapes of dogs, yet we have no hesitation in saying that *King Lear* is literature. *Animal Farm* is literature too; and so is Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*. But yesterday's *Times* and the *Guide Michelin* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* are not literature except in the loosest and most general sense of the word. Some people, in order to exclude this loose and general sense, use phrases like 'creative literature' or 'serious literature' or 'imaginative literature'. Such phrases may sometimes help us to understand what we are talking about, but each is open to objection—especially perhaps the first, since 'creative' has now become a fashionable and almost meaningless word in England.

Another problem which must not be forgotten, even though we may not be able to find an answer to it, is the problem of explaining the difference between 'good' and 'bad' literature. Some people, when talking about a book or a poem which is bad (or weak or ineffective or unsuccessful) simply say, 'This is not literature at all'; but I think this is a careless and incorrect use of language. It is more intelligent simply to say 'I don't like this poem,' or even 'This is a bad poem,' and to give one's reasons for so judging it: to deny that it

is a poem at all is to use words in a confusing, private way. Most of the literature produced in the world is mediocre; some is bad, some is good, and a very, very little is great. But all of it is literature. Let us go on however to think about a few of the qualities we expect to find in good literature. We shall probably not find all of them in any one work, but some, at least, must be present before we can call it good.

It has generally been thought that there is some sense in which literature should (to use Hamlet's phrase) 'hold the mirror up to nature'. It should be 'life-enhancing' or (as Matthew Arnold said of poetry) 'a criticism of life'. This means, I think, that we expect a writer, whether he be a poet, novelist or dramatist, to pass on to us some feeling or idea which we at once recognise as being, either actually or potentially, a part of our own experience. Almost every human being has had the experience, at some time or other, of quarrelling and parting in anger from someone he loves. Injured feelings or hurt pride seem to make friendship or love no longer possible, and we turn away in anger, saying (or thinking) 'I never want to see you again'. Yet we know, even at the moment of parting, that one little word or sign of love from the other person would be enough to soften us and bring about a reconciliation. This is the feeling expressed in a sonnet by Michael Drayton (1563-1631). As soon as we read it we feel that it is, in some sense, 'real'; it describes an emotion which, even if we have not actually felt it, we recognise as the kind of thing we would feel in certain circumstances; it does, in fact, 'hold the mirror up to nature'.

Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part—
Nay, I have done, you get no more of me;
And I am glad, yea, glad with all my heart,
That thus so cleanly I myself can free.
Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows,
And when we meet at any time again,
Be it not seen in either of our brows
That we one jot of former love retain.
Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,
When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies,
When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
And Innocence is closing up his eyes,
—Now if thou wouldst when all have given him over,
From death to life thou mightst him yet recover.

If, as I think, the kind of closeness to life which we find in this sonnet

is one of the distinguishing qualities of good literature, it follows that good writing can only come out of actual human experience. It is not, of course, the *quantity* of the writer's experience that counts; if this were so, young writers would necessarily be less good than old writers—a clear absurdity when we compare the best work of Shelley and Keats with that of older but less good writers. It is the *quality* of the experience, its strength and vitality, from which good writing comes.

As another example of the way good literature 'holds the mirror up to nature' (reflecting some thought or feeling which we immediately recognise as being 'true to life'), let us look at a modern poem—one which seems at first sight to be utterly different from Drayton's sonnet. *Fingers in the Door*, by David Holbrook (born 1923), is also about a feeling which most human beings have had at some time or another: the feeling of helplessness and separation when someone we love is suffering grief or pain which we are powerless to relieve. At such times we have an almost frightening sense of the fact that every human being is separate from every other. Even those who might be expected to feel close to each other, like the parents and child in Holbrook's poem, remain in some ways infinitely far apart, as though 'dispersed among dead bright stars'. *Fingers in the Door*, like much modern poetry, has no formal pattern of verse or rhyme. In this respect it is as different from *Since there's no help* as it could possibly be, for this latter uses the strict and difficult form of the 'English' sonnet (see page 87). Yet both poems are alike in possessing a quality which, I think, is essential in good literature, namely a concern with thoughts and feelings which we all recognise as belonging to real life.

Fingers in the Door

Careless for an instant I closed my child's fingers in the jamb. She
Held her breath, contorted the whole of her being, foetus-wise,
against the

Burning fact of the pain. And for a moment .

I wished myself dispersed in a hundred thousand pieces

Among the dead bright stars. The child's cry broke,

She clung to me, and it crowded in to me how she and I were

Light-years from any mutual help or comfort. For her I cast seed

Into her mother's womb; cells grew and launched itself as a being:

Nothing restores her to my being, or ours, even to the mother who
within her

Carried and quickened, bore, and sobbed at her separation, despite
all my envy,

Nothing can restore. She, I, mother, sister, dwell dispersed among
dead bright stars:
We are there in our hundred thousand pieces!

Another quality one may expect to find in good literature is originality. There is in modern times a great deal of talk about originality, whether in literature or any other form of art, and much of it is foolish. Of course no work of art can be original through and through. To find an original subject for a novel for example would be an almost impossible task, since writers have already dealt in one way or another with almost every imaginable human story or situation; but the novelist may nevertheless see an old story or an old idea in some quite new light. None of Shakespeare's plays was original in the sense that the stories and characters were created, so to speak, out of nothing. Hamlet and Macbeth were real historical characters; Othello was in all probability a character invented by an Italian novel-writer; but the plays Shakespeare made out of these figures were truly original in the sense that they showed old characters and stories and situations in a new and fascinating light. Most good literature is traditional and original at the same time.

There was nothing new in the story of Thomas Becket and his quarrel with Henry II in the twelfth century, and certainly nothing new in the idea of a play written in verse, though poetic drama had been almost dead in England since the time of Dryden. Yet in *Murder in the Cathedral* T. S. Eliot created a work which was in many ways strikingly original, while having roots deep in the traditions of the past. It must be remembered that the central themes of all literature—life, love and death—are in themselves unchanging; so are most of our ideas about these great subjects. Yet writers continue to discover new ways of looking at them, and will continue to do so as long as mankind exists. Originality, then, consists not of inventing new themes, but of seeing and expressing the old unalterable themes in a new way. This is what Pope meant in the well-known couplet:

True Wit is Nature to advantage drest;
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well exprest.

If, as I believe, there is now a tendency to overvalue originality in literature and the other arts, there is an equal tendency to undervalue the quality I want to discuss next, namely technical skill or craftsmanship. Writing is not only a matter of ideas and inspiration, but

also of practice and technique. Pope, from whose *Essay on Criticism* I have just quoted, reminds us in another couplet from the same poem that

True ease in writing comes from Art, not Chance;
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.

Unlike doctors and lawyers and engineers, poets and novelists do not have to go through any recognised and official course of training. Nevertheless their art cannot be mastered without effort and practice. Ideally a prose-writer should be an expert in the grammar and usage of his own language. If he is English he should have control of a large vocabulary selected from the half-million words of the *Oxford Dictionary*; he should be familiar with the great literary works of the past in his own and other languages; and he should be absolute master of a style suitable to whatever subject matter he chooses. A poet should have the same equipment, with the additional advantages of an ear sensitive to the sound of words, an understanding of verse techniques in several languages, and a perfect knowledge of all the possible forms of English poetry from the heroic couplet to the limerick!

It is clear of course that a man of such learning and skill (if he could be found) would not necessarily be a good writer. Literature can only come alive through the creative imagination; without this all the technical skill in the world is useless. Yet it is equally true that without some technical knowledge and craftsmanship no good writing is possible. Indeed it is a simple absence of language skills which prevents many sensitive and imaginative writers from becoming good writers. On the other hand there are writers of such imaginative power that we simply forget any weaknesses in their technique. Dickens and D. H. Lawrence, to quote only two examples, certainly did not always write prose to satisfy a perfectionist; but few critics would deny that they were very great novelists. Samuel Johnson on the other hand wrote prose and verse which are technically faultless; yet few would describe him as a great creative writer. In short, technical skill or craftsmanship—the art of ‘the right word in the right place’—is something we expect to find in most good literature; but it would be foolish to think that good literature is made by technique alone.

Another, and very important, feature which I think is to be found in almost all good literature is what I shall call ‘moral consciousness’. By this I mean a feeling on the part of the writer, and conveyed by him to the reader, that the words ‘good’ and ‘evil’ have a real

meaning—a meaning which lies beyond the ideas of right and wrong that happen to be accepted at one particular time or place. Like Shakespeare, many of the world's great writers seem to have accepted the orthodox religious and moral opinions of their own times. Others, like D. H. Lawrence, have rejected traditional beliefs, yet seem to have been inspired with a moral and religious fervour of their own. I am not saying that these great writers intended to moralise, or to impress upon us their own ideas of right and wrong: this would be far from the truth. What I am saying is that their works continually remind us that good and evil are real, and that we cannot be neutral towards them. There are a few writers (the nineteenth-century French poet Baudelaire is perhaps the best-known example) who seem to see themselves as supporters of evil and enemies of good: such writers (sometimes called Satanists) are no less aware of moral reality than those who write from the opposite side. Indeed it is impossible to see how serious literature could exist at all without this moral consciousness.

Sophocles, Dante, Milton, Goethe, Ibsen and Hardy at once spring to mind as writers strongly conscious of the everlasting war of good against evil. Even at the lowest level we find that literature is concerned in some way with morality. A look at any bookstall which sells 'colourful' paperbacks will persuade the reader that this is true. Only this morning I saw on the station bookstall a novel whose cover showed a naked lady pointing a revolver at an equally naked gentleman against a background of red curtains and disarranged bed: 'She left husband, child, and home for a life of crime and squalor', it said. Another showed a young priest looking doubtfully at a seminaked lady with a hypodermic syringe: 'He loved London's wickedest woman!' announced the advertisement. It may be said that the writers and publishers of these books, and of millions like them, are taking commercial advantage of the evil of human nature. In fact however it is not so much that we find evil attractive as that we are deeply interested in the eternal war between evil and good. We only find 'bad' people interesting because we believe that most people are 'good'. Satan in *Paradise Lost* and Iago in *Othello* can only have meaning if we accept the idea of moral good to which they are opposed.

To summarise what has been said, we may now say that literature (as we are using the word in this book) is a permanent expression in words of some thought or feeling or idea about life and the world. Literature may be good, bad or indifferent; but good literature will have some, if not all, of the following qualities: (i) psychological truth or 'holding the mirror up to nature'; (ii) originality; (iii) craftsmanship; and (iv) a consciousness of moral values.

Now that we have thought a little about what literature is, it is time to go back to the question I asked at the beginning: what is the use of it? Are there any good reasons in the second half of the twentieth century for studying the literature of our own country or of any other country—especially when so many of the books we shall read will be old? Are there not more urgent and important matters to which we ought to give our attention?

There are many ways in which these questions might be answered. The one I shall begin with is not the most important, but it is one which will be well understood by those readers to whom England is a foreign country, and English a foreign language.

When one is interested in a country and its people and its language—a country perhaps that one has not yet visited—there are few better ways of getting to know it than through its literature, and I do not mean literature in the sense of guide books and travel booklets, useful as these may be. If for example you are interested in England, you may be surprised to find how many English people are keen supporters of the Monarchy. The newspapers and magazines seem always to be publishing news and features about the Queen and the Royal Family. It seems strange that such an ancient system of government should be so popular in a country which is proud of being democratic and which has about fourteen million Labour and Socialist voters. Why should factory-workers and farm labourers, no less than millionaires and aristocrats, believe in anything so seemingly undemocratic?

There is of course no simple explanation of this; but one can begin to understand it by reading some of Shakespeare's historical plays, and especially *King Henry V*. Here one sees not only the conception of a king as *primus inter pares* (the nobles are all the king's 'cousins'), but also an actual king who is not only the friend and protector of his poorest subjects, but also in a certain sense their equal. The same play also helps us to understand the strange relationship, sometimes quarrelsome, sometimes friendly, often comical, which binds the people of the British Isles together in spite of their differences and difficulties. The secondary characters of the four captains—English, Scots, Welsh and Irish—are typical of the comic folklore of the four 'nations'.

Turning to modern English literature, the foreign student will find few better ways of learning about English life than through novels. It is important of course to understand that people in novels are not always like people in real life. One must always remember too that a great many contemporary novelists like to write about people who are 'intellectuals'—university teachers, highbrow journalists, artists or even novelists like themselves. It would be a serious mistake to imagine that the characters in Iris Murdoch's novels (for example)

are in any way typically English. The novels of Margaret Drabble on the other hand (I am certainly not saying they are 'better' novels) are about the sort of people one might meet almost anywhere in England. It is also important to remember that things change rapidly, even in England, and that the social conditions described by Dickens no longer exist. Provided that one understands this, there is much to be learned about English life as it was forty or fifty years ago by reading for example D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* or John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*. The first gives a true and lively picture of working-class life; the second an equally true and lively view of the rich and comfortable *bourgeoisie*—and the 'class' habits and opinions described are not altogether dead even in the 1970s.

Apart from the light it throws on our character and social life, English literature can be helpful to the foreign student or visitor who wishes to learn something about a particular region, and to understand how human character and emotion are influenced by natural surroundings. Some of the best novelists have been 'regional' novelists, like Thomas Hardy (see page 124) who wrote about the south-western part of England, to which he gave the old name of Wessex; or Arnold Bennett (1867–1931) whose novels are set in a part of England which the ordinary foreign visitor never sees—namely the midland area known as 'The Potteries' or 'The Five Towns'. Poetry, too, can teach us something about a place: it is impossible fully to enjoy a visit to the Lake District without some knowledge of Wordsworth and the other 'Lake Poets', just as it is impossible fully to understand Wordsworth without knowing something of the Lake District. (The Lake District is a very beautiful part of north-west England where Wordsworth spent most of his life.) The fact that literature helps us to understand a country and its people is, I think, especially true of England. (It will be helpful if I explain at this point that I shall generally write 'England' when I mean the whole of Britain. This will make my Scottish friends and my Welsh compatriots angry, but it will make things easier for foreign readers who are in the habit of saying England when they really mean The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.)

So much for the special reasons which a student may have for studying the literature of another country. Let us now go on to consider more general reasons. One such reason (though not a very good one) is the desire to appear 'cultured' or 'well read.' In most civilised countries people are proud of being well educated and knowledgeable. They like (to use a popular colloquial phrase) to 'keep up with the Joneses'. In some English and American social circles a knowledge of the names of fashionable writers, if not actually of their works, is

socially necessary: indeed it may be smarter to talk knowingly about McLuhan and Timothy Leary than to possess a Rolls-Royce car and a private secretary. Readers of this book, however, probably have a more solid reason for studying literature, namely the desire to pass an examination.

They will of course have other and better reasons, which we shall be coming to later; but it is very probable that the passing of examinations is their immediate goal, and that they originally chose English literature as one of their subjects for no better reason than that it seemed easier or less disagreeable than chemistry or applied mathematics. In many ways it is unfortunate that literature has now become a subject for study and examination in schools and colleges. That young people should be helped and encouraged and guided in their reading is good, but that they should study literature *only* in order to pass examinations is certainly bad. If anything could make William Shakespeare turn in his much-visited grave at Stratford it would be the thought of millions of English schoolchildren and foreign students painfully reading through his plays, memorising set speeches, and making careful notes on 'characters'—all so that they can pass an Oxford examination, win a Cambridge certificate, or by some other means prove to the world that they are people of education and culture. Yet there is at least one good thing to be said for studying literature in order to pass examinations: it trains students to pay close attention to the printed word, and encourages them to think deeply about the meaning of what is written. In the past, in Europe at least, this was done through the study of Greek and Latin literature. In our own time the student of modern languages needs to learn the same kind of careful attention to detail. It is all too easy, in a world dominated by radio and television, to lose the habit of thoughtful and careful reading.

In spite of television however, reading still remains one of the cheapest and easiest forms of enjoyment for literate people. Strangely enough indeed it has been found that the sale of books and the use of libraries has been increasing more rapidly than ever before. It would be pleasant to think that this is a result of more education and better teaching of literature in schools; whatever the cause, the fact remains that there are far more readers of books now than there were in the days before television. So it seems that millions of people get a great deal of pleasure from reading, and that the student of literature can expect to enjoy his studies. Indeed, if he is the right kind of student, he is going to be in the same happy position as the creative artist: most of his work will not be labour, but pleasure.

It is important though that those who teach literature and set

examinations in it should use more intelligence than they sometimes do in choosing suitable texts for students. Many novels, many plays and a few poems are of a kind which will give direct and immediate pleasure; others (especially if they were written a century or two ago) may at first seem less attractive because they demand concentrated reading—perhaps two or three readings—before they can be understood. The really great writers of the past (Shakespeare and Milton for example) require a great deal of study before the ordinary modern reader can enjoy them; and this is specially true of course if the reader is one whose mother tongue is not English. But any efforts that have to be made will bring rich rewards in the end; for there is no doubt that the pleasure we get from any great work of art—sculpture, painting, symphony or poem—will depend very much on the time we are willing to spend in studying it. This may not be true for all those unwilling children who set out to study English Literature for elementary examinations, but it is certainly true for older and more serious students. In fact there must be a great many teachers of literature who, like myself, have read through some of the great English works hundreds of times with different generations of students, discovering new pleasures and new problems at each reading. (Whether the pleasures have been communicated to the students is a different question.) In the same way anyone who loves music, and who hears some famous work like the *Eroica* symphony for the twentieth time, will probably enjoy it much more than he did at first hearing. On the other hand there are many books, and they are not all bad books, which are scarcely worth reading more than once: Francis Bacon (see page 229) expressed this cleverly in a well-known sentence from his essay *Of Books*: ‘Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed and some few to be chewed and digested.’ It is certain however that most of the world’s greatest literature can only be enjoyed fully after repeated reading and much thought.

To learn about another country, to appear well educated, to pass examinations or simply to enjoy oneself—all these are reasons (good or bad) for studying literature. The best reason however is quite different, and at first sight it may appear strange and out of date. It is however a reason which has been given by many great men in the past, including Plato, namely that by studying literature we are in some sense making ourselves better people: literature in fact is something from which we get moral education. Sir Philip Sidney (1554–86) in his *Apologie for Poetrie* explains that by reading of the deeds of good and heroic men we ourselves are led towards goodness and heroism. The great eighteenth-century critic Samuel Johnson (see page 234) liked to say that the purpose of literature was to instruct.

At first sight it may seem that Sidney and Johnson were thinking of literature as nothing more than a collection of moral stories like Aesop's fables, and that they would disapprove for example of Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and most of Somerset Maugham's short stories simply because they showed the bad side of human nature rather than the good. But it would be foolish to imagine that men as intelligent as Plato and Sidney and Johnson would hold such an opinion. Let me try to explain what they meant by saying that the purpose of literature is to instruct.

A famous man (I have forgotten who) once said, 'We learn history so that we may go over the road of progress once, and not a thousand times.' For the politician, therefore, or the soldier or the diplomat or the businessman, history is an extremely important subject. It may or may not be true that Field Marshals Montgomery and Rommel learned much about warfare by studying the lives of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Napoleon: it is at least reasonable to suppose that they did. In the same way people who have been responsible for ruling distant colonies have certainly been able to learn what not to do by studying the history of colonialism during the early part of this century. And in all other activities it is clear that the reading of books is a means of getting much more knowledge than we could ever hope to get through our own personal experience. The lady who quarrelled with her doctor and said, 'What do you know about childbirth? You've never had a single baby, and I've had *four*!' was not really very intelligent. The doctor was quite right when he replied, 'True, Madam; but I have *watched* four hundred and thirty-seven births, and studied detailed reports of ten times as many.' When a single person is asked by a married friend, 'What can you know of the problems of marriage? You have never experienced them,' he may reasonably reply, 'No, but I have read about Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath'; and I have also read *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Father*, *David Copperfield*, *Women in Love*, *Jude the Obscure* and a great many other works in which some of the world's most intelligent men and women have passed on to me their thought and experience about this difficult subject.' And anyone old or middle-aged, who has forgotten what it feels like to be young, can relive the experience through the work of numberless good writers—writers as various as J. D. Salinger (an American) in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Wordsworth in *The Prelude* and Proust (who was French) in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Incidentally the English translation of this last by Scott-Moncrieff must be one of the masterpieces of the difficult art of turning a great book from one language into another.

It is often said by practical people that books cannot replace the

experience of real life, and this is certainly true. To shut oneself up in a small and windowless room, seeing the world only through books, is a very poor way of living. Even Milton, one of the most bookish of all great writers, played an active part in the life and politics of his time: 'I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue,' he wrote. But the total knowledge of life which any one person can get through his own experience is extremely small. Through literature he can use the experience of other people as well, so becoming what Bacon called 'a full man'—tolerant, understanding and perhaps even wise.

Although we may feel a little doubtful about the idea of ourselves becoming good by imitating the great and good characters we read about, we must surely admit that the opposite is true: namely that we can learn what *not* to do by seeing the common faults and weaknesses of mankind exposed in imaginative literature. We read *Don Quixote* (by Cervantes, a Spaniard) and learn that it is foolish to mistake dreams for reality; we read *Hamlet* and learn that a failure to make decisions can be dangerous; we read *The Wild Duck* (by Ibsen, a Norwegian) and learn that idealists can sometimes cause more unhappiness than the worst criminals; we read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and learn that some modern ideas about progress and civilisation can be terribly wrong. In short the belief that literature has a *moral* purpose is not nearly as foolish or old fashioned as may at first be thought.

The use of literature is therefore very much the same as the use of history or philosophy: it helps us toward a better understanding of ourselves and our fellow human beings. That is why in English we use the phrase 'the Humanities' to describe studies of this kind and to mark them off from scientific and technical studies. Subjects like psychology and the social sciences stand halfway between the true sciences (physics, chemistry, etc.) and the Humanities: they are sometimes described, not without reason, as being pseudo-sciences. It may be true, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, that studying literature and the Humanities will not help us to feed the hungry today or to save one human life tomorrow. Taking a longer view however it is possible to see this kind of study as almost the most important of all: for by studying good literature we learn more about human problems and difficulties; by studying the literature of other countries we begin to understand that these problems are shared by all mankind. This is surely an important step towards international understanding and world peace.

I hope, after what has been said, that the reader will not think of the study of English literature (or any other serious literature) as being

useless or a waste of time. It is important however to warn him of two dangers into which this study can lead: the first is the habit of thinking too much about the literature of the past, and the second the habit (even more unhealthy) of spending too much time with 'books about books' (like this one!), and not enough with original books (the works of the great novelists and poets and dramatists who have written in English).

The first of these dangers is probably less real than it seems because it would be unwise for students to give more than (let us say) one third of their time to reading the works of living writers. This is not to say that some living writers may not be as good as the best writers of the past. Most people would agree however that it takes fifty years (and perhaps much longer) for any work of art to find its proper level in the judgement of mankind. As I have said, it is possible though not very probable that readers in the twenty-first century will think that the best English poetry of our time has been produced by the Beatles rather than by T. S. Eliot or Robert Frost. Most critics in Shakespeare's time would have thought his plays greatly inferior to those of Ben Jonson (see page 184). It is in fact well known that the judgements of one period are likely to be reversed by those of the next. It often takes a century or more for the pendulum to stop swinging so that we can see the true position.

In a period like our own when a few critics have the power, through cultural journals and cultural television programmes, to influence public opinion, it becomes more and more difficult to make cool judgements about the work of our contemporaries. If we are not careful we find ourselves believing without question that the plays and films which happen to please Mr A., who writes in *The Observer*, or the novels and poems which draw praise from Dr B. and Miss C. in *The Spectator* are necessarily 'better' than those we choose for ourselves. I am not suggesting that the opinions of critics are valueless, only that they should be received with caution, especially when they are about contemporaries.

Our view of contemporary literature can be clouded too by all sorts of personal likes and dislikes. If our political opinions happen to be 'leftish' we shall admire the German dramatist Brecht and dislike Eliot; if we happen to be Catholic we shall admire Graham Greene and dislike Bertrand Russell. Also (and this is especially true if we are critics or academic writers on literature) we have read of the terrible mistakes made by critics in the past—the misunderstanding of Wagner, the destruction of Keats, the attack on the early impressionist painters—and we are determined not to make the same sort of mistakes ourselves. And so when a new composer or poet or painter appears, we hail him

as a genius, just in case he should prove, in spite of appearances, to be another Wagner or Keats or Cézanne.

Since it is so difficult to make a true judgement of the value and importance of the literature of our own time, we must not be disappointed if we find our studies concentrated mainly on the literature of the past—on those works which have, as we say, ‘stood the test of time’ and are now accepted by almost all intelligent and educated people as ‘great’. But (and this is most important) we must never forget that English literature is a living and growing thing, and not, like Greek and Latin literature, a body incapable of further growth or development.

The habit of reading too many ‘books about books’ is one which the student of literature should do his best to avoid. The production of such books, especially in America, is now almost a major industry; and for every one reputable poet or novelist or dramatist there are probably a hundred research students, lecturers, professors or critics, all busily interpreting the *real* writers, and of course writing books about each other’s books. One is reminded of the incident in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (see page 29) where the evil Dragon named Error is resisting the brave attack of the Red Cross Knight (I have modernised Spenser’s odd spelling):

Therewith she spewed out of her filthy maw
A flood of poison horrible and black,
Full of great lumps of flesh and gobbets raw,
Which stank so vilely, that it forced him slack
His grasping hold, and from her turn him back.
Her vomit full of *books and papers* was,
With loathly frogs and toads, which eyes did lack.

In Spenser’s time the books and papers so plentifully and horribly vomited by the Dragon Error were religious and theological; in our time they deal with a wider variety of subjects, many of them, I am sorry to say, being literary criticism of the kind which serves to divert our attention from the real works of literature we ought to be studying and enjoying. Of course we need the help of good scholars and critics if we are to get the most out of the texts we study; of course we shall understand Shakespeare better if we have read for example Samuel Johnson’s preface to his great edition of the plays, or Professor Wilson Knight’s studies in *The Wheel of Fire*; but let us not spend so much time with the critics and scholars that we have no time for Shakespeare himself.

In spite of what I have been saying against them, 'books about books' can be very useful to an intelligent reader who wishes to get a wide general knowledge of literature. Most of us simply do not have time to read more than a very few of the world's great books: in fact it is impossible in a lifetime to know more than a small part even of the literature of one's own country. When a critic tells us (as one critic did in my Sunday newspaper last week) that Miss Y's new book is 'the most powerful novel about rural England since *The Return of the Native*' one can only wonder whether he has really read every such novel published since 1878. Most of us know only too well that our reading is sadly limited; and if we have neither the time nor the skill to read for example the whole of Dante or Goethe we need not be ashamed of reading shortened and simplified versions of the *Divina Commedia* or *Faust*. It is not as good as reading the originals, but it is better than nothing.

Yet some years ago when Somerset Maugham published a book called *Ten Novels and Their Authors*, he was attacked by many critics and academics for being an enemy of culture and a 'populariser'. What he had done was to write the fascinating life stories of ten great writers along with short descriptions of their greatest works. He believed, I suppose, that a little knowledge about, for example, the Russian novelists Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky was better than no knowledge at all; and people who lack the time or the energy to read *War and Peace* or *The Brothers Karamazov* must surely be grateful to him. The effect of his book, like that of television serials such as *The Forsyte Saga* and modern films of Shakespeare's plays, was not to make the public too lazy to read the works for themselves: on the contrary, it encouraged them to do so. If 'books about books' can do this, we have no reason to complain about them. After all, the continents of literature are so vast that no single traveller can explore more than a few small parts of them. On the shores of such continents we are like those little, doll-like figures in great landscape paintings: busy with our own little affairs in the foreground, while behind us stretches an enchanted country whose cities we shall never visit, whose mountains we shall never climb. Such small journeys as we can make for ourselves will demand thought and preparation if they are to be fully enjoyed; and because our time is short we shall need to make good use of the maps and reports prepared by other, earlier travellers. A few such maps and reports are to be found in the pages that follow, and I hope they will help the student to find his way about some parts of the great continent of English literature.

Since the meaning of this last phrase is a little uncertain (it can mean either 'literature written in the English language' or 'literature

produced in England ') I had better explain that generally, though not always, I shall be using it in the second sense. This of course is not because I imagine the literature of America or English-speaking India or Africa to be less important or less good, but only because I prefer to write about what I happen to know best.

CHAPTER TWO

Ballad, Epic and Other Narrative Poetry

I said at the beginning that literature is writing which expresses and communicates thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards life. Yet many of the things which we now call literature began life without being written at all. Even today we find folk songs and comic verses passing from person to person by word of mouth. This, as we shall see later, is how most of the old ballads came into existence.

The English word 'ballad' is used in a number of different ways, as anyone can see by looking it up in a dictionary. When it is used in connection with literature it nearly always means (in the words of the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*) 'a simple, spirited poem in short stanzas, narrating some popular story'. The old English ballads include some of the best and most exciting poetry in the language. They have had a very great influence on later poetry, and indeed on English literature in general. Most of them seem to have been composed at some time between 1350 and 1550, which means that their language differs a little from modern English. It also happens that the best ballads came from northern England and southern Scotland, so many of them are composed in a dialect which the foreign reader will find a little strange. Indeed many of the words are strange even to a modern Englishman, but this does not make a ballads difficult to read; in some ways it actually adds to their charm:

The king sits in Dunfermline town,
Drinking the blude-red wine;
'O where will I get a skeely skipper
To sail this new ship o' mine?'

O up and spak an eldern knight,
Sat at the king's right knee;
'Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor
That ever sailed the sea.'

The important thing about a ballad is that it is a narrative poem: it tells a story. After reading a number of ballads you will begin to see that there are certain subjects which appear over and over again. Much the most popular subjects are those old favourites, sex and violence. Anybody who is shocked or distressed by the amount of sex and violence shown on television or in the modern cinema had better avoid reading the old ballads altogether; for in them he will find children thrown from castle walls on to the sharp spears of besieging soldiers, guilty lovers surprised in their beds and bloodily murdered, women who poison their husbands and sell their children, men butchered in family quarrels and left on the road to be eaten by dogs and crows, girls seduced and cruelly murdered. Even little boys playing football are not safe: in *Hugh of Lincoln* the boy, having accidentally kicked his ball into the Jew's Garden, is enticed by the Jew's daughter, who offers him a beautiful apple, then

She's led him in through one dark door,
And so has she through nine;
She's laid him on a dressing table
And stabbed him like a swine.

And first came out the thick, thick blood,
And syne came out the thin,
And syne came out the bonny heart's blood;
There was no more within.

She's wrapped him in a sheet o' lead,
Bade him lie still and sleep;
She's thrown him into Our Lady's well,
Was fifty fathom deep.

Nastiness of this kind is not unusual in the old ballads. Many of them came, as I have said, from the English-Scottish border country where the violence of guerilla war was a part of everyday life at the time they were composed. *Edom o' Gordon* for example is a terrible story of Gordon's attack on the castle of the Rodes. In the absence of Lord Rodes the castle is defended only by his wife, who has her small children with her. Because she will not surrender, Gordon sets fire to it—helped by one of Rodes's servants. Frightened by the flames and the smoke, the little girl begs her mother to wrap her up in sheets and throw her over the castle wall:

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They wrapped her in a pair o' sheets,
And tow'd her owre the wall;
But on the point o' Gordon's spear
She gat a deadly fall.

O bonnie, bonnie was her mouth,
And cherry were her cheeks,
And clear, clear was her yellow hair,
Whereon the red blood dreeps.

Then with his spear he turn'd her owre;
O gin her face was wane!
He said, 'Ye are the first that e'er
I wished alive again.'

Lady Rodes and the other children die in the flames as Gordon and his men ride away. The story ends with the return of Lord Rodes and an assurance from the poet that he went on to avenge the death of his family in Gordon's 'foul heart's blood'.

Another favourite subject in the old ballads is the supernatural—ghosts, magic, witchcraft, superstition—for it must be remembered that men and women in those days not only lived in fear of war and violence, but also of unseen supernatural dangers. Many ballads for example use the subject which was so well used by the German romantic Bürger (1747-94) in his *Lenore*. Bürger of course was a 'sophisticated' poet who was consciously imitating the subjects (and to some extent the style) of the old 'primitive' ballads. The subject of *Lenore*, which is the return of the dead lover to claim his bride, is found in many of the Anglo-Scottish ballads—*Clerk Saunders* for example and *The Daemon Lover*. In the *Wife of Usher's Well* it is not a lover but the three sons of a widow who return to her after being drowned at sea. They are allowed only one night at home; at dawn they must return to the country of the dead:

'The cock doth craw, the day doth daw,
The channerin' worm doth chide:
Gin we be missed out of our place,
Sair pain we maun abide.'

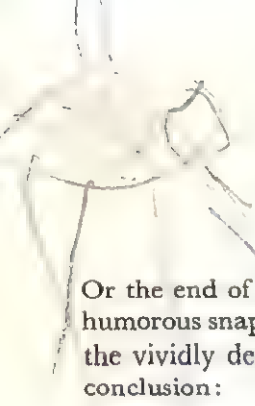
These lines, though difficult or perhaps impossible for anyone unfamiliar with the language of English poetry, have the true sound and feeling of the ballad.

In England at least, the Robin Hood ballads are better known than any others. Children hear them at school, and they are still seen in film and television versions. Like King Arthur, Robin is one of the great English folk heroes. He was probably a real historical character who lived in the English north-midlands in the twelfth century. In most of the stories he is described as living in Sherwood Forest, near Nottingham, as leader of a group of outlaws with the familiar names of Little John, Friar Tuck, Much the Miller's Son and Maid Marian. Although outlawed and feared by the authorities (generally represented by the Sheriff of Nottingham), Robin and his friends were helpers of the poor and the weak; brave, generous and humorous; defenders of 'true' justice against the 'official' justice of the king and the laws. Robin, in short, is the typical romantic hero. Perhaps because they come from central England and not, like most of the other ballads, from the Scottish border, the Robin Hood ballads are less tragic and more humorous. They have a life and gaiety which make them particularly attractive to young readers; but (to me at least) they never reach the high poetic quality of the Scottish border ballads.

'But perhaps', someone may say 'you are making too much of the poetic value of these old ballads. Is it not possible that we find them interesting only because they are old? How can the poems of unknown and half-civilised men be as good as the work of Goethe or Rilke or Wordsworth or T. S. Eliot?' I am not sure that this is a very intelligent question—especially at a time when popular (or 'pop') culture exists so happily side by side with the other sort of culture. We did not after all ask whether the music of the Beatles was as *good* as the music of Mahler: we simply accepted that it was different. We must not forget that the ballads were part of the pop culture of their time. It would be unfair to compare them with more sophisticated poetry, but they have a strange poetic quality of their own. It is perhaps not easy to convey this to a foreign reader, but he might well see something of it in these lines from Thomas the Rhymer:


O they rade on and farther on,
And they waded rivers abune the knee;
And they saw neither sun nor moon,
But they heard the roaring of the sea.

Or the last stanza of *The Queen's Marie*, where Marie Hamilton, the lady-in-waiting whom the king has seduced, is about to be hanged for the murder of her baby:



O little did my mother ken
The day she cradled me,
The lands I was to travel in
Or the death I was to die!

Or the end of *Sir Patrick Spens* with its sudden swing from the almost humorous snapshot of the smart courtiers in the sinking ship, through the vividly descriptive piece about the 'feather beds', to the tragic conclusion:



O laith, laith were our gude Scots lords
To wet their cork-heel'd shoon;
But lang or a' the play was played
They wat their hats aboon.

And mony was the feather bed
That flatter'd on the faem;
And mony was the gude lord's son
That never mair cam hame.

O lang, lang may the ladies sit,
With their fans into their hand,
Before they see Sir Pattick Spens
Come sailing to the strand!

And lang, lang may the maidens sit
Wi' their gowd kames in their hair,
A-waiting for their ain dear loves!
For them they'll see nae mair.

Half-owre, half-owre to Aberdour,
'Tis fifty fathom deep;
And there lies gude Sir Patrick Spens
Wi' the Scots lords at his feet!

One thing which the unknown author of *Sir Patrick Spens* could not have foreseen was the renewal of interest in ballad-making during the present century. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), better known as a writer of brilliant comedies, wrote the tragic and magnificent *Ballad of Reading Gaol* while he himself was imprisoned in Reading Gaol in 1896. Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) used the old forms and styles in *Barrack*

Room Ballads and much of his other poetry. Among living poets, W. H. Auden has written in the tradition of the ballad, notably in *Victor* and *Miss Gee*; both these poems have the tragedy and horror of some of the old ballads, though their simplicity hides a Freudian sophistication which would have seemed strange to the writer of *Sir Patrick Spens* or *Edom o' Gordon*.

It is however during the last ten or fifteen years that we have seen the most striking re-awakening of the ballad spirit—not so much in the work of well-known poets and writers as among young people—the young people who make folk songs or calypsos (spontaneous, topical, West Indian songs) and sing them to the accompaniment of the guitar; or who compose protest songs and other poetry to be read aloud in public houses and coffee bars. Many of the songs made famous by the pop groups of the 1960s might be called modern ballads. Like the ballads of the late Middle Ages they are passed from person to person by word of mouth and not by the printed page, and their subjects are often found in everyday life or the news of the day.

The ballad is probably the simplest form of narrative poetry, and the epic the most complicated. Yet the two are closely related. The difference between them is like the difference between two sisters both born in the same quiet, country place. One of them has stayed there and kept all the charm of her natural simplicity while the other has gone to the big city to find sophistication and money for expensive clothes. Let us see how this happened.

We have already seen that it is quite possible for poetry (like the ballad) to exist without being written down. More than a thousand years ago there existed in many parts of Europe a great mass of stories, part history and part legend, about the gods and heroes of the past. As the separate nations began to appear, each nation began to attach importance to its own special stories, and these were sometimes put together by unknown men—poets or bards or minstrels—to make heroic poems. The phrase 'heroic poetry' means something half-way between ballad and epic. There is no need to consider the details here, but anyone who is interested should read Sir Maurice Bowra's *Heroic Poetry* (1952) which is probably the fullest and most important work on the subject (in English).

The heroic poem differs from the ballad in being longer, in having more characters, and in having a nationalistic or tribal feeling. It differs also in its form: for while ballads are almost always in the typical ballad metre, heroic poems have the line (rather than the stanza) as their metrical unit. Ballads can be sung to a simple repeated tune, while heroic poems cannot. The difference between the heroic poem

and the epic is equally hard to define: indeed many writers use the phrase 'primitive epic' or 'folk epic' to describe works like the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, the Finnish *Kalevala* and the German *Nibelungenlied*, which others would call simply heroic poems.

For the ordinary modern reader the old heroic poems have little interest. Indeed they are extremely difficult to read even when translated into modern language. The Anglo-Saxon (or Old English) of *Beowulf* for example is as different from modern English as modern English is different from German. Heroic or folk epic poetry is mentioned here only because it is the soil out of which the classical epic grew; and the classical epic cannot be neglected by any serious student of English literature, because it was the form chosen by one of England's greatest poets for one of the greatest poems in the English language, *Paradise Lost*. We shall come to Milton and *Paradise Lost* later but first let us see how the typically European form which we call the literary or classical epic grew from the old heroic poetry. To do so we shall have to go back as far as Homer (some time between 1000 and 800 B.C.).

The legend of the old, blind poet who composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is well known. No one is sure who he was, or even whether he actually existed; but it might be argued that the *Iliad* has had more influence on the culture of Europe than any other single work of literature except the Bible. It consists, modern scholars believe, of a mixture of history and legend which was old even in Homer's time—old songs and bits of old heroic poetry which Homer (whoever he was) collected and mixed together with poetry he himself had composed. The story of the ten-year siege of Troy (Ilium) is too well known to need retelling here. Few people now can read it in Homer's Greek, but there are good modern translations in almost every European language. But it was the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 B.C.) who set the example which European epic poets were to follow for almost two thousand years. Homer had given the epic its power and grandeur; Virgil in the *Aeneid* gave it its permanent shape and its strange conventions. Before looking at Milton and the other English epic poets, let us see what those conventions were. (The reader who wishes to study this subject in more detail should read *The English Epic* by E. M. W. Tillyard, and *From Virgil to Milton* by Sir Maurice Bowra.)

Perhaps the easiest way of answering the question, 'What is an epic?' would be to say, 'It is a poem like Virgil's *Aeneid* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*'; but this would not be very helpful to those of us who have read neither. Let us begin therefore by saying that it is a long poem (at least half as long as this book, and often longer) about the doings of one or more character from history or legend. These doings

are usually war-like, and involve a large number of secondary characters, as well as a background of gods and spirits who join in the action from time to time. Because the epic is long, the poet has plenty of time for digressions and descriptions. In this he resembles the novelist, and is very different from the dramatist who must say what he wishes to say in two or three short hours of stage-time. So Homer gives us a description of the armour of Achilles which runs to several pages, and Milton does the same in describing the shield and spear of Satan.

Another characteristic of the epic is what Professor Tillyard calls its 'choric' nature. By this he means that epic poetry is in a sense public poetry—generally nationalistic or tribal. The poet is not only writing to express his own thoughts and feelings, but the thoughts and feelings of some large group or community. So Dante in the *Divina Commedia* was in many senses a spokesman for the whole of medieval Christianity, and Milton for English and European Protestantism in his own time.

Above all perhaps the epic is marked by what has been called its 'high seriousness'. The poet, like Milton and Virgil planning their great works, knowingly sets out to make something which will be the best of which he is capable—something of real importance which his fellow men 'will not willingly let die'. Milton in particular had this high sense of duty and dedication. He led a busy life in the politics of his time, yet he always felt himself to be a man chosen by God to do a great work: to write a poem which would place England among the greatest cultural nations of Europe.

Unlike the ballad, which remains very much alive in the popular culture of Britain and America (and, no doubt, in most other countries too), the epic as a form of literature is now dead. By this I mean that no modern poet would set out to write a serious epic today: I certainly do not mean that the great European epics of the past are dead in any other sense, though they are difficult for the modern reader who is unwilling to make the necessary effort. We live at a time when most people believe in artistic freedom, and feel that the poet or the artist should not be tied by rules from the past. Such a feeling would have seemed strange to the authors of *Paradise Lost* and the *Divina Commedia*, who believed in following as closely as possible the example set by Homer and Virgil. Indeed this example was followed so closely that every true epic was expected to include certain features for no better reason than that they were included in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. I shall give a list of these features (more or less in order of importance) to assist any reader who wants to attempt *Paradise Lost* or (a less formidable task) Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (see page 160).

1. A prayer or ' invocation ' in which the poet asks some god or muse to help him in his great work. Milton for example begins *Paradise Lost* by calling upon the Holy Spirit:

...thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples the upright heart and pure
Instruct me, for thou knowst: thou from the first
Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss,
and mad'st it pregnant; what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support
That to the highth of this great argument
I may assert eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

2. The so-called ' Homeric simile ': an ordinary simile might describe a young man as ' tall and dark and straight, like a young cypress tree ', but a Homeric simile enlarges the comparison so that it becomes a little ' poem-within-a-poem ':

Like some young cypress, tall, and dark, and straight,
Which in a queen's secluded garden throws
Its slight dark shadow on the moonlit turf
By midnight, to a bubbling fountain's sound—
So slender Sohrab seem'd, so softly reared.

This example (which is short compared with Homer's own similes) is taken from *Sohrab and Rustum*, a nineteenth-century narrative poem in which Matthew Arnold (1822-88) successfully used the epic style (see page 45 below).

3. A description of some kind of athletic contest or ' games '; this rather surprising feature is found in most ' sophisticated ' epics simply because Homer tells us how Achilles arranged a day of athletic competitions in honour of his dead friend, Patroclus. Virgil followed with his account of Anchises's funeral games in the *Aeneid*. After this poets seemed to think that no epic was complete without such games. In Book II of *Paradise Lost* even the fallen angels arrange an athletic meeting.

4. A long and dangerous journey made by the hero: Aeneas's journey to the underworld to seek the spirit of Anchises; a journey to the moon in the *Orlando Furioso* of Ariosto (1474-1533); and Satan's journey through space in *Paradise Lost*.

5. Beginning the story in the middle of the action—in *medias res* as the Roman critic and poet, Horace, called it. The *Aeneid* begins with the arrival of Aeneas at Carthage, but this is followed by the long story which he tells about the fall of Troy, his own escape, and his voyage to the Carthaginian shore. The same technique is of course common in modern novels and films.

Besides the five features I have described there are many other tricks of style which, simply because they had been used by Homer and Virgil, were regarded by later epic poets as necessary in any epic poem: but there is no need to say anything about them here. From what has been said it will be clear that the literary epic is something entirely different from the simple and unwritten ballads out of which it grew. It is very different too from anything the ordinary modern reader is familiar with. Yet it was in this form that some of the greatest minds of Europe chose to express themselves. In England Milton was perhaps the only poet who could certainly be included in their number. I shall say more about him soon, but it may be useful first to offer a few notes on lesser English poets who have attempted the epic style.

There are several Old English (Anglo-Saxon) heroic poems dating from the eighth to the eleventh centuries. These include *The Battle of Maldon*, *Brunanburh* and *Beowulf*. The last is the longest and most important.

Beowulf was probably composed during the ninth century A.D. by a poet whose name we do not know. The hero, Beowulf, comes with his fourteen warrior-companions to the palace of Heorot (the setting is in Denmark). He finds the Lord of Heorot, Hrothgar, terrorised by a monster called Grendel. Eventually Beowulf kills Grendel, finds his home beneath a great lake, and kills Grendel's mother—an equally terrible monster. He then returns to his own country, where he becomes king, ruling for fifty years before he dies of wounds received in combat with a dragon. There are elements of historical fact in the narrative.

From the tenth to the sixteenth centuries there is no English poem which can be called a true epic. If we were to include prose works however we should probably be obliged to regard the *Morte d'Arthur* of Sir Thomas Malory (died 1471) as an epic of the unsophisticated kind. Certainly it contains epic material; indeed it was this material which Milton at first thought of using for his own epic attempt. Had he done so we might have had an 'Arthuriad' instead of *Paradise Lost*.

The Faerie Queene of Edmund Spenser (1552-99) began as perhaps the most ambitious of all English poems, and if Spenser had shown

the control and stamina of the successful epic poet it might have stood beside *Paradise Lost* as a great national epic. There should have been twelve books, but Spenser completed only six of them. He explained his 'grand design' in an introductory letter addressed to his friend, Sir Walter Raleigh. Each book was to deal with the adventures of a single knight of the Faerie Queene's court, and each knight was to represent a single virtue (holiness, temperance, chastity, justice, etc.). The whole was to be united by the character of Prince Arthur, who was to appear in each book, and who represents magnanimity or great-heartedness, the supreme virtue which binds together all the others. Spenser was much influenced by the Italian epic poet Ariosto, and probably also by Tasso.

As an epic *The Faerie Queene* is a failure, but it is a magnificent failure. The modern reader often finds the pace too slow, and is irritated by Spenser's strange and pseudo-antique language. Most of all, he is confused by the complications of the allegory, which cannot be understood without a knowledge of neo-Platonic philosophy, and of the actual politics of Spenser's time. Any particular character is likely to exist on at least three levels: first as a person in the story, then as the personification of some moral or spiritual idea, then as an actual personality of Spenser's time. Thus the wicked enchantress Duessa represents not only Spiritual Pride, but also the Roman Catholic Church and Mary Queen of Scots.

The reader who has not yet attempted Spenser, but would like to do so, is advised to start by reading a single book (preferably Book I) at his leisure, then reading it again, and perhaps a third time. He may then find it possible to adjust his mind to Spenser's strange world, and to enjoy it as one enjoys some great piece of Renaissance tapestry, woven all over with strange figures and landscapes. The effort is well worth making, though, as I have said, it is not certain that *The Faerie Queene* could properly be called an epic, even if Spenser had finished it.

The *Davideis* of Abraham Cowley (1618-67) appeared in 1656, eleven years before *Paradise Lost*, though Cowley was ten years younger than Milton. It is an unfinished epic in four books on the Biblical stories of King David, and was apparently written while Cowley was still a young man at Cambridge. Cowley had an interesting life, and was active in the politics of the time (on the royalist side). He was a busy writer, of prose, poetry and drama; and Milton is said to have considered him as third only to Shakespeare and Spenser.

In *Paradise Lost* Milton (1608-74) created the one undoubtedly great English epic—great in the sense that it can be compared with almost all the great epics of classical and post-classical Europe (though not,

I think, with Virgil or Homer). All through his life Milton felt that he was, in a sense, a man chosen by God to write *the* great English poem. As has been said, he considered the Arthurian stories as a possible subject, and at times he thought of writing the poem in dramatic form. He finally settled on the subject of the Fall of Man, with the war between God and the rebel angels as its cause and background. His decision to write in blank verse was a considerable innovation at the time, since all the previous English epics or attempted epics had been in rhymed verse. Milton (in a note at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*) spoke of rhyme in long poems as 'the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame metre'. In one of his prose pamphlets he had stated his intention of writing a great poem in English:

that what the greatest and choicest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I in my proportion, with this over and above of being a Christian, might do for mine.

Besides his intention of writing something which would bring glory to his own country, Milton had a religious and philosophical purpose which was, as he said, 'to justify the ways of God to men'; in other words, to answer the old question which all Christians must answer: namely, if God is all-good and all-powerful, why is there suffering and evil in the world?

Because Milton is one of the most difficult of all English poets the foreign reader may feel that it is impossible to read very much of him. Even his early poems (*L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* for example) are full of words and references which modern *English* readers find strange. So the foreign student who is defeated by the first few pages of *Paradise Lost* need not feel ashamed. He can come back to Milton when he feels strong enough. In the meantime he may find the following outline of *Paradise Lost* of some interest:

Book I The story, taken partly from the Bible and partly from old Jewish myths and legends, describes what Christians know as the Fall of Man. That is to say, the disobedience of Adam and Eve, which caused them to be driven out of the carefree Garden of Eden, and which brought suffering and death into the world. The action, which takes place between Heaven, Earth and Hell, begins with Satan's defeated armies lying hopelessly on the burning lake of Hell. Satan (then known as Lucifer) had been chief of the angels in Heaven; but, having rebelled against God, he and his followers were driven out:

Him the Almighty Power
Hurl'd headlong flaming from the ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion, down
To bottomless perdition; there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire,
Who durst defy the Omnipotent to arms.

Satan, shown all through the poem as a great and powerful leader, awakens his downcast armies, makes them build a great palace in Hell (Pandemonium) and calls a council of war.

Book II The council is held and the fallen angels argue what is to be done next in their war against God. Some wish to accept defeat, others to make a new attack on Heaven, even though it would end in their own destruction. In the end it is agreed that the best way of attacking God is indirectly, through his newly-made World. Satan promises to discover that World, and starts his great journey through space.

Book III Seeing Satan flying towards the World, God foretells the Fall of Adam and Eve. Satan continues his journey, and lands on Mount Niphates.

Book IV A description is given of the Garden of Eden, and the way Adam and Eve live there. Satan learns that God has warned the couple not to eat the apples from the Tree of Knowledge. He decides that he will persuade Eve to disobey, and begins by tempting her in a dream.

Books V to VIII Eve tells Adam about the dream. God sends the archangel Raphael to warn them against disobedience. He also gives them a long account of Satan's rebellion and the war in Heaven, explaining how God then decided to make a new World with human beings in it. Adam asks him about the structure of the universe, which Raphael explains at length. (In Milton's time most people were still uncertain whether it moved around the earth or, as Copernicus had recently suggested, around the sun. Milton probably accepted the Copernican theory, but for the purpose of the poem he makes Raphael's explanation uncertain.)

Book IX Satan, having taken the shape of a serpent, finds Eve alone and persuades her to eat the apple. Afterwards she tells Adam what she has done, and persuades him, if he loves her, to do the same.

They become aware of their own sexuality, then ashamed of it. They quarrel for the first time.

Book X God sends his Son to judge Adam and Eve. The Son promises to save them from complete destruction; but Sin and Death are now able to enter the Garden. Satan returns to Hell and tells his followers what has happened. As they are rejoicing in his success they suddenly change into serpents: this is a strange incident in the poem, but Milton probably intended it as a reminder that evil is ugly, and that God cannot allow it to be wholly victorious.

Books XI and XII Persuaded by his Son not to destroy Adam and Eve, God decides that they must at least be driven out of Eden. He sends Michael to drive them out. Michael explains God's intentions to the couple, and shows them the future of mankind in a vision. He then leads them away into the imperfect world outside, where they must remain until the second coming of the Son of God.

It can be seen from this outline that it is not only Milton's language that is difficult. His religion and his philosophy, and the myths and symbols in which he expresses them, are also difficult. Fortunately however poetry can often be enjoyed without being fully understood; and anyone who cares to read a few pages of *Paradise Lost* in the hope of finding pleasure there will probably not be disappointed. Here, as a small sample, is the famous description of evening in the Garden of Eden:

Now came still Evening on, and Twilight gray
Had in her sober livery all things clad:
Silence accompanied, for beast and bird,
They to their grassy couch, these to their nests,
Were slunk, all but the wakeful nightingale;
She all night long her amorous descant sung;
Silence was pleased. Now glowed the firmament
With living sapphires; Hesperus, that led
The starry host, rode brightest, till the moon,
Rising in clouded majesty, at length
Apparent queen, unveil'd her peerless light,
And o'er the dark her silver mantle threw.

Looking at this elaborate and formal language, so different from the simple poetry of the ballads, one finds it difficult to remember that ballad and epic had the same beginning in the unwritten folk poetry of our ancestors.

After Milton the literary epic began to die—not only in England but also in Europe. Small echoes of its greatness could be heard in poems like Keats's *Hyperion* (1818-19) or Southey's *Vision of Judgment* (1821), which Byron was to laugh at in a satire with the same title. The only English poetic work to achieve an epic grandeur in any way comparable to *Paradise Lost* was *The Dynasts*, a magnificent dramatic poem on the subject of the Napoleonic wars, by Thomas Hardy (see page 124). *The Dynasts* however, described by its author as 'an epic-drama', is not an epic in the usual sense of the word, and need not concern us here. If the epic was dying during the eighteenth century, it was perhaps unkind of Alexander Pope (1688-1744) to make fun of it as he did. In *The Dunciad* and *The Rape of the Lock* he used the style of the epic in conjunction with subjects that were far from heroic: the latter poem employs all the heavy epic machinery to tell the story of a silly young gentleman who caused a social uproar by cutting a lock of hair from the head of a fashionable lady. It is a brilliant piece of writing, and any student who wishes to study the epic conventions without facing the difficulties of long and over-serious poems would do well to start with *The Rape of the Lock*. He should be warned however that sophisticated poetry of this kind is never easy, however light the subject.

The sophisticated epic must take an important part in any history of European literature. It belongs to the Graeco-Roman culture which we all share; and it has attracted the attention of great poets in almost every European country. Most modern readers however prefer simpler and more direct narrative poetry. We have looked at some poetry of this kind in the shape of the ballads; it is now time to consider other kinds of narrative poetry.

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) was called by Dryden 'the father of English poetry'—a phrase still commonly used by English people, even those who have never read a word of what Chaucer wrote. *The Canterbury Tales* is certainly the most important group of narrative poems ever written in England, and I shall describe it as far as is possible in one or two pages. First however I shall give a few notes about Chaucer's language. It is convenient to divide the history of the English language into three periods: Old English (up to about 1200), Middle English (to about 1500) and Modern English (since 1500). It is naturally impossible to state any definite dates: there was no single month or year during which people said, 'Let's stop talking Middle English and begin to talk Modern English instead.' We must remember too that 'old' and 'modern' are here used in a rather special sense: Old English (often called Anglo-Saxon) is as different from Modern English as Modern English is from German; the Modern

English of Shakespeare is very different from the English we use now—though we understand it easily enough. Chaucer's Middle English grew out of a mixture of Old English and Norman French; and it is part of Chaucer's importance in English history that he was the first great poet to use this 'new' language in all his work. His friend John Gower wrote three long poems of which one was in Latin, one French and one English: all three languages were in common use among educated people, and it was largely because of this that English became one of the richest and most mixed languages of Europe. It is quite usual to find in Modern English that there are groups of words like 'kingly', 'regal' and 'royal', having almost the same meanings, one from Old English, one from Latin and one from Norman French.

Chaucer's Middle English is difficult, even for the ordinary modern Englishman. For the foreigner (unless he is a specialist) it is almost impossible. Fortunately however there is a complete 'translation' of *The Canterbury Tales* into modern English in which the author, Nevill Coghill, has succeeded in making *The Tales* easy to understand without losing too much of the 'feeling' of Chaucer. I shall use Coghill's translation when quoting Chaucer in this book. The reader may be interested to see what Chaucer's own language looks like, even if he cannot understand much of it, so here is the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales* where he describes the spring season, the fresh rain, the crops and flowers, the singing of the birds, and people thinking about holidays—pilgrimages to holy places, and especially to Canterbury:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour:
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye
That slepen al the night with open yē,
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages)
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmers for to seken straunge strondes—
To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes:
And specially, from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The holy blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seke.

Clearly this is impossible for all but the most enterprising foreign reader: it is almost impossible for most English people, unless they have made some special study of Chaucer in school. That is why we need Nevill Coghill's translation:

When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,
When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath
Exhales an air in every grove and heath
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the *Ram* has run,
And the small fowl are making melody
That sleep away the night with open eye
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,
And specially, from every shire's end
In England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.

The *Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* describes how Chaucer himself decided to make a pilgrimage to Canterbury, and how he met twenty-nine other people at an inn called 'The Tabard' just south of London. All of them were making the same journey, and the host at the inn suggested that they should make it more interesting by telling stories. Each traveller was to tell two stories on the way to Canterbury, and two on the way back. This would have made at least 120 stories altogether, and it is not surprising that Chaucer (a busy government official) did not have time to finish the work. Indeed *The Tales* as we now have them are only twenty-four in number, and of these three remain unfinished. The most interesting part of the book is the *Prologue*, which describes Chaucer's travelling companions in some detail, and gives a far more living picture of society in fourteenth-century England than one could get from a serious historian. Indeed it is these portraits of real people, so much like ourselves in spite of the six centuries that separate us, that make Chaucer's *Prologue* one of the great masterpieces of English literature.

Most of the people described belong to the middle classes. It is

only the Knight, his son the Squire and the Prioress who could be described as 'upper class'. The rest are either tradespeople (like the Carpenter and the Miller and the Wife of Bath), professional men like the Doctor and the Lawyer, or churchmen like the Monk and the Friar. Some of the portraits are satirical, but Chaucer's satire is never angry or savage. He looks at the world with a smile, even when what he sees is unpleasant. He never attacks his characters, only makes gentle fun of them: the Doctor for example loved money:

For gold in physic is a cordial,
Therefore he loved gold in special.

The Lawyer had a great sense of his own importance:

Nowhere there was so busy a man as he;
But yet was busier than he seemed to be.

It is difficult to choose any one of Chaucer's characters for more detailed description. My own favourite is the Wife of Bath, a lady who had become rich through the cloth trade in the west of England. Chaucer tells us that her business was even better than that of the merchants of Ypres and Ghent in Flanders. Like her modern equivalent, the rich English or American widow who goes cruising, she was a great traveller. Not only had she made pilgrimages to the Three Kings at Cologne and St James at Compostella in Spain, she had even been to Jerusalem—a long and dangerous journey in the fourteenth century. She had had no fewer than five husbands, not to mention 'other company in youth', and this had made her (at least in her own opinion) an expert in affairs of love and marriage. On these subjects, and on most other subjects, she talked loudly and laughed often.

A less attractive character was the Pardoner, whose description I shall quote at length in Coghill's translation. A pardoner was a travelling priest who was allowed to sell pardons or indulgences to those who hoped to escape the consequences of their bad deeds in the future life, and who could afford to pay for them. As is well known, the selling of indulgences was one of the many evils in the Church which were to lead, more than a hundred years after Chaucer's time, to the Reformation.

This Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax
Hanging down smoothly like a hank of flax;
In driblets fell his locks behind his head
Down to his shoulders which they overspread;
Thinly they fell, like rat-tails, one by one.

He wore no hood upon his head, for fun;
The hood inside his wallet had been stowed,
He aimed at riding in the latest mode;
But for a little cap his head was bare
And he had bulging eye-balls, like a hare.
He'd sewed a holy relic on his cap;
His wallet lay before him on his lap,
Brimful of pardons come from Rome all hot.
He had the same small voice a goat has got.
His chin no beard had harboured, nor would harbour,
Smoother than ever chin was left by barber.
I judge he was a gelding or a mare.
As to his trade, from Berwick down to Ware
There was no pardoner of equal grace,
For in his trunk he had a pillow-case
Which he asserted was Our Lady's veil.
He said he had a gobbet of the sail
Saint Peter had the time when he made bold
To walk the waves, till Jesu Christ took hold.
He had a cross of metal set with stones
And, in a glass, a rubble of pigs' bones.
And with these relics, any time he found
Some poor up-country parson to astound,
On one short day, in money down, he drew
More than the parson in a month or two,
And by his flatteries and prevarication
Made monkeys of the priest and congregation.
But still to do him justice first and last
In church he was a noble ecclesiast.
How well he read a lesson or told a story!
But, best of all, he sang an Offertory,
For well he knew that when that song was sung
He'd have to preach and tune his honey-tongue
And (well he could) win silver from the crowd.
That's why he sang so merrily and loud.

Although the *Prologue* is the best-known part of *The Canterbury Tales*, the tales themselves are of great interest and variety. Each of them is exactly suited to the person who tells it. *The Knight's Tale* of Palamon and Arcite, for example, is about war and chivalry; *The Prioress's Tale* is religious and charmingly sentimental; *The Carpenter's Tale* is brutal and coarse. With so many to choose from it is difficult to advise

the reader where to start. I suggest however that the three tales described in the next few pages (read in Coghill's translation) will be most interesting to the ordinary reader.

The Miller's Tale is the extremely amusing (but rather improper) story of an old man, his pretty young wife Alison, and the young Oxford scholar Nicholas who lives in their house. Nicholas, who is in love with Alison, pretends that he has learned in a dream that the world is to be drowned in a great flood, like Noah's flood in the Bible. He persuades the old man that the three of them can be saved by making a boat, placing it on the roof of the house, and waiting for the water to rise. On the supposed night of the flood they climb into the boat, and as soon as the old man is asleep Nicholas and Alison leave him there while they make love downstairs. They are interrupted however by another of Alison's admirers, and after some crudely comical exchanges the story ends in confusion, with the poor old man on the roof waking up and cutting the ropes of his boat so that it falls. *The Miller's Tale* is an example of Chaucer's ability to tell a simple story in an amusing way. It is a piece of low comedy which illustrates one important side of his genius.

The Franklin's Tale is very different. It is a charming example of the delicacy and refinement of which Chaucer was also capable. (A Franklin was a small land-owner, the kind of man who was later known as a country gentleman.) Here too we have a love story of the 'eternal triangle' sort; but it shows human nature at its best, and not, as in *The Miller's Tale*, at its worst. The story is about a knight named Arveragus and his beautiful wife Dorigen. They lived in Brittany in complete happiness until Arveragus was obliged to go to England on some sort of military service. Dorigen remained completely faithful to him, and would sit for hours on the sea-cliffs of Brittany longing for his return. Being a philosophical young woman she would sometimes look at the dangerous rocks—'those grisly feendly rokkes blake'—which made the sea so dangerous, and wonder why a good and loving God should have made things so evil and so useless. (Her long soliloquy on this question gives Chaucer an opportunity for some interesting philosophical writing.) One day Dorigen's friends persuade her to go to a party where she meets a young man called Aurelius. He has in fact been in love with Dorigen for many years without her knowledge, but on this occasion he cannot resist telling her about it. She replies that she loves her husband, and has no intention of being unfaithful to him, adding as a joke that she will never give herself to Aurelius until he has removed all the black rocks from their coast. Disappointed and sad, Aurelius becomes ill and retires to bed for two whole years, hoping to die (it is a highly romantic story!).

Meanwhile Arveragus returns, and continues his happy life with Dorigen. But Aurelius, with the help of his brother, gets to know a magician, who promises that he will actually remove the rocks in return for a payment of a thousand pounds. So Aurelius is able to show the astonished Dorigen that the rocks have disappeared, and that she must keep the promise made to him as a joke. She is horrified, and thinks of killing herself. Fortunately however everyone now behaves in the most gentlemanly and chivalrous way: Aurelius decides not to insist on Dorigen keeping her promise; Arveragus decides to forgive him for the trouble he has caused; and the magician will not accept the thousand pounds that Aurelius owes him. The Franklin ends his tale by asking the audience which of the three men they think behaved most generously.

The Pardoner's Tale is in the form of a medieval sermon followed by an *exemplum*—that is to say, a story to illustrate it. The sermon is on the subject of greed, whether for money or for anything else: *radix malorum est cupiditas*. I advise the reader not to worry himself over this long and difficult lecture, but to begin with the *exemplum*, described by Somerset Maugham as the best story in the world. It is about three drunken men who, after learning that Death has taken away one of their friends, decide that they will find Death and kill him. An old man tells them that they will have no difficulty in finding Death if they go to a particular place in the forest. Having found the place, they see a great heap of gold there. In their greed and delight they immediately forget their first purpose, and begin to plan the best way of getting the gold to their homes. Thinking that they must wait until dark, they agree that the youngest shall go and buy some food and wine, while the other two guard the money. As soon as he has gone the two plan to keep all of it for themselves by killing the young man on his return. He however has made a similar decision. Having bought the food and wine he adds poison to the latter so that both his companions will die, leaving him in possession of the gold. He returns. They kill him as planned; then, tired after their wicked work, they sit down to drink the wine which he has brought. Within a few minutes they too are dead. They have succeeded, as the old man foretold, in finding Death, but not in killing him.

I have of course given these three tales in only the barest outline, hoping that the reader may try them for himself in the Coghill translation. If he finds that even this is too difficult, he will at least have gained a little second-hand knowledge of Chaucer; and that is better than nothing. The other narrative poems to be described in this chapter are in ordinary modern English, so I shall not provide summaries of them.

The idea of joining a number of short stories (or narrative poems) as 'tales within a tale' was not new in Chaucer's time. It had been used long ago in the collection of Eastern stories known as *The Thousand and One Nights*, and it had been used in Italy by Boccaccio in Chaucer's own lifetime. The same idea was used by a number of later poets including Tennyson, who will be mentioned soon. First however I shall say something about seven other poets, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who wrote important narrative works.

George Crabbe (1754-1832) is a poet who was neglected and undervalued for many years. Recently however there has been new interest in him—chiefly because the composer Benjamin Britten chose one of Crabbe's story-poems as the subject of his opera *Peter Grimes*. The early part of Crabbe's life was spent at Aldeburgh in Suffolk, where he was brought up in extreme poverty. Later, after spending a few years in London, he returned to his home town and worked there for some time as a clergyman. During this time he wrote the poems which he published in *The Parish Register* and *The Borough*. These are a mixture of description and narrative—including the dramatic tale of the solitary and savage fisherman, Peter Grimes. Crabbe published several other volumes of narrative poetry during his long life (spent as a clergyman in various parts of England). He is a very individualistic poet, being not much affected by the romantic revival through which he lived, or by the eighteenth-century 'classical' style which ruled in his younger days. His subjects were nearly always taken from the lives of ordinary people—the sort of people who lived in the small country towns where he worked. He had more feeling for social justice than most people of his times.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) would be named by many people as England's greatest poet. With Coleridge (see below) he produced the famous volume of *Lyrical Ballads* which first appeared in 1798, and which marked the beginning of the so-called romantic revolution in English poetry. Wordsworth's most important work is to be found in his philosophical and autobiographical poems, especially *The Prelude*, but he also wrote many narrative poems of which *Michael* is perhaps the best. *Michael* is the story of an old shepherd in the Lake District (where Wordsworth spent most of his life). It is a powerful and tragic poem, written in the simple and direct style which Wordsworth generally favoured in poetry. This style sometimes led to absurdities, though certainly not in *Michael*. It has however the advantage of making Wordsworth fairly easy for the foreign reader. Other narrative poems which should be read are *Lucy Gray*, *The Idiot Boy* and perhaps *Laodamia*.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was Wordsworth's friend and

collaborator in the *Lyrical Ballads*. He was an important literary critic, his *Biographia Literaria* containing (among many other things) a study of Wordsworth's poetry. He was also a philosopher and theologian, who helped to make the work of Kant (the German philosopher) known in England. The ordinary modern reader thinks of Coleridge above all as the author of *The Ancient Mariner*. This, included in the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, is one of the best (and best known) of all English narrative poems. In form it is modelled on the old ballads, and a new reader might at first mistake it for one. One soon realises however that it is not only a mysterious and exciting story but also a philosophical poem of great depth. By shooting the albatross, the beautiful white bird that has been following the ship and bringing good winds, the Mariner commits a crime against God and Nature. (It is significant that the shooting is entirely pointless—there is no reason for it.) The result is evil and death. The wind drops, the ship is becalmed for weeks, there is no water to drink, and one by one the men die of thirst, leaving the Mariner alone:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.

The many men so beautiful!
And they all dead did lie:
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.

I looked upon the rotting sea,
And drew my eyes away:
I looked upon the rotting deck,
And there the dead men lay.

I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;
But or ever a prayer had gushed,
A wicked whisper came, and made
My heart as dry as dust.

I closed my lids, and kept them close,
And the balls like pulses beat;
For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky
Lay like a load on my weary eye,
And the dead were at my feet.

No literature could express more powerfully the feeling of hopelessness and desolation. Then, as though by chance, the Mariner finds himself looking at the brightly coloured fish and 'water-snakes':

Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! No tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware;
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.

Suddenly the dead albatross, which the other sailors have hung around his neck as a punishment, falls away. The man can pray again, having realised the love of God through the beauty of the world and all living things. This is the 'meaning' of *The Ancient Mariner*; but it is a long and complex poem which cannot be fully described here. It should certainly be read, and read again, by anyone who is interested in English poetry. The two other poems for which Coleridge is particularly famous are *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan*. The latter is not strictly a narrative poem; but *Christabel* is a mysterious and romantic tale which can be enjoyed even without being fully understood.

George Gordon, sixth Lord Byron (1788-1824) is a poet who has always been more appreciated on the Continent than in England. One reason for this (there are many others) is his preference for continental rather than English settings and subjects. Both *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan* have something of the travelogue about them, but the latter is a work of almost epic grandeur. One can enjoy it by reading parts of it rather than attempting to read the whole. The satirical passages are clever and amusing, but not easy to appreciate without some knowledge of the people Byron is laughing at (including Coleridge). Of Byron's shorter and more direct narrative poems, *Mazeppa*, *The Prisoner of Chillon* and *The Corsair* are among the most readable. Another interesting poem is *The Island*, which tells the story of the famous mutiny on the ship *Bounty* and the mutineers' 'commune' on Pitcairn Island.

John Keats (1795-1821) is one of the great figures of English

romanticism—not only because of his poetry, but because of the sadness and shortness of his life. His best work is in his famous odes, *On a Grecian Urn*, *To a Nightingale* and *To Autumn*, and perhaps in the long ‘classical’ poem *Endymion* and the unfinished *Hyperion*. His narrative poems, rich in sensuous descriptions, are thought by some readers to have insufficient action. *The Eve of St Agnes* is about two lovers whose families (like those of Romeo and Juliet) are bitter enemies. Porphyro however makes his way into the house at night, and helped by the old servant, Angela, hides in Madeline’s bedroom. Having watched her undress and go to bed, he wakes her with a song. At first she believes she is dreaming, but later Porphyro persuades her to escape with him:

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;
Where lay the porter, in uneasy sprawl,
With a huge empty flaggon by his side:
The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,
But his sagacious eyes an inmate owns:
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

And they are gone: ayé, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm...

Lamia and *Isabella* should also be read. The latter is a rather horrible tale from Boccaccio about a girl whose lover was murdered by her two brothers. They bury his body in a wood, but Isabella discovers where it is in a dream, cuts off the head, and hides it in a plant-pot.

Robert Browning (1812-89) was one of England’s most productive poets. Like Tennyson (see below) he was able to supply the Victorian reading public (who—especially if they were ladies—had a great deal of time to spare) with the kind of poetry they wanted. In the first half of the present century Browning was undervalued—as indeed were many of the great figures of the Victorian period. Even in modern English the word ‘Victorian’ is sometimes used in an uncomplimentary way. Lately however critics and readers have re-awakened to the fact that Browning is a very great poet. He is certainly a master of dramatic narrative, though the foreign reader may wonder where to start in the great mass of poetry that makes up Browning’s *Collected Works*.

I suggest that he begins with four quite short poems, *The Laboratory*, *The Confessional*, *Porphyria's Lover* and *The Statue and the Bust*. These are fairly simple examples of Browning's favourite type of composition, the so-called dramatic lyric in which characters are invented (as they are in a play) and made to speak for themselves. More difficult, but extremely interesting, examples are *Andrea del Sarto*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Abt Vogler* and *A Toccata of Galuppi's*; the first two are about painting, the second two about music. Browning was learned in both subjects. A very different side of Browning can be seen in his love poems, *Meeting at Night*, *Parting at Morning*, *Two in the Campagna* and many others. These are generally simpler in style than the dramatic lyrics. The story of Browning's own love affair and marriage with the poetess Elizabeth Barrett is of course one of the famous 'real life' romances of English literature.

Matthew Arnold (see page 28) was a well-known poet and critic of the Victorian period. I have already mentioned his beautiful *Sohrab and Rustum*, a poem in which he adapted the style and conventions of the classical epic to tell a simple and sad story about the great Persian hero Rustum and his son, and how they were led by chance to fight each other in single combat, neither knowing the identity of the other. *The Forsaken Merman* is a story with a more reflective tone. Neither these nor Arnold's more philosophical poems are easy to read, but *Sohrab and Rustum* is one of the best of all English narrative poems.

Alfred, first Lord Tennyson (1809-92) was the first and only Englishman to be made a lord for writing poetry. Not only did he please the nineteenth-century public, he also pleased Queen Victoria, who was a great reader and admirer of his work. Like Browning, Tennyson was a highly productive writer; like Browning too, he was undervalued during the earlier part of this century. His best work is probably to be found in the long poem *In Memoriam*, which he wrote in memory of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam (died 1833).

For the present however we are concerned only with his great narrative sequence, *Idylls of the King*. This is a series of story-poems which together make up a poetic novel. It tells the story of King Arthur and the groups of knights who made up the famous Round Table. The chief subject is the guilty love between Sir Lancelot and Arthur's Queen Guinevere, a love which became the indirect cause of the break-up of

The goodliest fellowship of famous knights
Whereof this world holds record,

and of Arthur's death, described so magnificently in *The Passing of Arthur*. (The greater part of this poem had been written many years before the *Idylls of the King*, and was published under the title *Morte d' Arthur*.) The story ends with the great battle in the west between the armies of Arthur and Modred. Both armies are destroyed, and Arthur is left alone with Sir Bedivere, the last of his knights. In a strange, dream-like scene Bedivere takes the dying king to the shore of a lake, where a black barge is waiting to carry him away. Bedivere lifts the king into the barge, and this is how the poem ends:

Then loudly cried the bold Sir Bedivere,
' Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go?
Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?
For now I see the true old times are dead,
When every morning brought a noble chance,
And every chance brought out a noble knight.
Such times have been not since the light that led
The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.
But now the whole ROUND TABLE is dissolved
Which was an image of the mighty world;
And I, the last, go forth companionless,
And the days darken round me, and the years,
Among new men, strange faces, other minds.'

And slowly answer'd Arthur from the barge:
' The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?
I have lived my life, and that which I have done
May He within Himself make pure! but thou,
If thou shouldst never see my face again,
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.
But now farewell. I am going a long way
With these thou seest—if indeed I go—
(For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)

To the island-valley of Avilion;
 Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
 Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
 Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard-lawns
 And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,
 Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.'

So said he, and the barge with oar and sail
 Moved from the brink, like some full-breasted swan
 That, fluting a wild carol ere her death,
 Ruffles her pure cold plume, and takes the flood
 With swarthy webs. Long stood Sir Bedivere
 Revolving many memories, till the hull
 Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn,
 And on the mere the wailing died away.

From the point of view of narrative poetry (I am not speaking of other kinds of poetry) the nineteenth century was the most productive in the whole history of English literature. Not only in quantity, but also in quality, there had been nothing like it since Chaucer's time. When we come to the present century however we find the most important poets showing less interest in direct narrative, and more in poetry of a lyrical or philosophical or dramatic kind. Simple story-telling is out of date, and this is perhaps a pity.

John Masefield (1878-1967) is an exception to what I have just said. His long poem *The Everlasting Mercy*, written before the First World War, is still a powerful and readable history of the change caused by religion in the personality of a village outcast and drunkard, Saul Kane. *Reynard The Fox* has been compared to Chaucer's *Prologue* as a lively picture of a group of people of the poet's own time. It describes a meet of fox-hunters in an English village. It is perhaps a sign of the twentieth-century's lost interest in narrative poetry that these two poems (and Masefield's other long poem *Dauber*, which concerns his own early life as a sailor) are almost forgotten; while shorter poems like *Sea Fever* and *The West Wind* are still well known.

There are three other poets, now a little out of fashion, who must be mentioned in any account of narrative poetry in the first half of this century. Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938), now out of favour because of his 'imperialistic' and 'upper-class' associations, was a fine versifier whose tragic narrative poem *He fell among Thieves* is good and exciting to read. So is Wilfred Wilson Gibson's (1878-1962) famous *Flannan Isle*, the true story of a lonely Scottish lighthouse from which

the men mysteriously disappeared. Another poet chiefly remembered for a single famous work is Alfred Noyes (1880-1958). He wrote a number of poems widely read in the 1920s and 1930s, but the one still familiar to most English readers is *The Highwayman*, a romantic and exciting story which can be enjoyed by anyone with a reasonable knowledge of English. It grips one's attention with the opening lines:

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas . . .

and holds it all through the story, to the death of the highwayman at the end,

When they shot him down on the highway,
Down like a dog on the highway . . .

Of poets writing during the last thirty or forty years I have already mentioned W. H. Auden (born 1907), who is happily still alive, and who must stand with T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) as one of the great poets of the twentieth century. Little of Auden's work is narrative, but his ballad-style poems, *Victor*, *Miss Gee*, *The Quarry*, and *Lady, Weeping at the Crossroads* are not only good as poetry, but have the advantage of being easily readable by anyone whose English is not very fluent. It would not be correct to describe *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas (1914-55) as a narrative poem, but it must be mentioned here as a most important piece of twentieth-century writing—deeply serious and imaginative, and at the same time deeply comic. Literature is about places as well as about people, and Thomas's Welsh village is the best portrait of a place and a community to be found in British poetry. (I say 'British' for once because Thomas was not an Englishman, and his language is Anglo-Welsh rather than plain English.)

It seems probable that long and carefully-worked narrative poems like those of Tennyson and Masfield are now as out of date as the epic which Milton inherited from Virgil and the other great European poets. In saying this I mean of course that such poems may never be written again. Those that already exist (except the bad ones) will continue to live as all great literature lives—as the music of Bach or Mozart lives—even though in one sense it is out of date. It may happen that the present popularity of folk music and pop songs will give new life to the ballad, the kind of poem which can be sung or recited to the accompaniment of a guitar. There are signs that this is happening already, though no one would pretend that such poems (calypsos for example) have yet got the quality of serious literature.

CHAPTER THREE

Tragic Drama

In the ordinary English of conversation or the newspaper a tragedy is simply a sad or unlucky event. Too often we read headlines like 'Holiday Bathing Tragedy' or 'Family Killed in Motorway Tragedy'. Even in the theatre the word is carelessly used to describe any play which has an unhappy ending or (like *Hamlet*) an unusual number of dead bodies on the stage. For the critic or student of literature however the word has a rather different and more specialised meaning. *Hamlet* is indeed a tragedy, but not simply because it includes so many sudden and unnatural deaths.

In this chapter I shall first say a little about tragedy in general, and then introduce the reader to some of the chief English dramatists who have written tragedies. In the modern theatre the distinction between tragedy and comedy has become a little out of date, so that one never knows whether a play by Pinter for example is one or the other. It could also be argued that there are tragic novels, like Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (see page 127), and tragic poems, like Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum* (page 45). For the present however we shall think about tragedy in the strictest sense, that is to say tragic drama.

The beginnings of tragedy, like the beginnings of so much of western civilisation, are to be found in ancient Greece. During the fifth century before Christ the great Athenian dramatists, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, wrote tragedies of a power and a beauty that has never been equalled. Fortunately most of their plays still exist, and some of them are still performed in the modern theatre. At the time I am writing this some cinemas in London are showing a new film of *The Trojan Women* of Euripides, made by the modern producer Cacoyannis. Tender-hearted Londoners drop tears as the little boy Astyanax is taken from his mother Andromache to be killed by the Greeks, just as tender-hearted Athenians did when they saw the same scene in 415 B.C. The *King Oedipus* of Sophocles is as exciting and as terrible on the modern stage as it was when performed in Athens twenty-four centuries ago. Many readers of this book will already know something

about Greek tragedy—they may have read some examples in Greek, or in translation in their own language. For those without such knowledge however it may be helpful if I mention the chief points in which it differed from the drama of our own time, or of Shakespeare's. These were:

1. Stories already well known to the audience: the dramatist was not expected to invent new characters or plots, but to use the old stories of gods and kings and heroes.

2. A strong religious element: the great drama festivals in Athens were held in honour of the wine-god, Dionysus. Even when people no longer believed in the old gods as actual persons, they felt that the world was controlled by moral law (*themis*) and that men who broke that law would be punished by divine justice (*dike*) and fate (*nemesis*). This feeling or belief lies behind all the great classical tragedies.

3. A dislike of horror and violence on the stage: the subjects of tragedy were often shocking and terrible, but the evil deeds were done off the stage. The audience learned of them from the chorus or from 'messengers'.

4. Few actors: the earliest plays had only two actors and a chorus. In the great days of Athenian tragedy however there were four, five or even six chief actors, and a chorus of fifty men. No plays had anything like the number of actors found for example in a Shakespeare play.

5. Characters above the level of ordinary men: all the chief figures in a tragedy were kings, queens, princes, princesses or heroes. The idea of 'domestic' tragedy, in which the people on the stage are 'just like ourselves', would have been quite strange to a Greek tragedian. The Greeks may have invented democracy, but it does not appear in their tragedies.

6. No mixing of tragedy and comedy: a Greek tragedy had 'unity of action'—that is to say, it had *one* story and only one. It would have been unthinkable for Aeschylus or Sophocles or Euripides to include comic characters and scenes in serious plays, as Shakespeare so often did. The Greeks liked fun as much as any other people however, and many of them no doubt felt a little tired after watching a tragic trilogy (that is to say a set of three tragedies) for several hours. It became usual therefore to end the performance with a 'satyr play'—a play quite separate from the tragic trilogy, and often crudely comic.

It would be interesting to look at Greek tragedy in more detail, but to do so would be out of place in a book like this, which is intended for students of English. However before we turn to Shakespeare (who must necessarily dominate any discussion of English tragic drama), there are three points of view which we ought to consider with regard to tragedy in general. These points of view (they are too vague to be-

called theories) are connected with three men standing centuries apart from each other, namely Aristotle, Chaucer and G. W. Hegel.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) wrote a little book now called the *Poetics* into which he put some of his thoughts about literature in general, and tragedy in particular. Living at the time when Greek tragedy was at its height, and being familiar with the works of the great dramatists who were almost his contemporaries, he found himself asking two questions about the psychology of theatre-going. The first one was this: why do we get pleasure and satisfaction from seeing in the theatre things we should certainly not enjoy in reality? Aristotle's answer was that certain emotions, especially the emotions of pity and fear, do not get used enough in civilised life. One of the effects of tragedy is to stir up these emotions so that they flow away from us like the waste products of the body after purgation. The Greek word for purgation is *catharsis*. To watch a tragedy is a sort of psychological medicine. In post-Freudian jargon, it helps to make us free of 'inhibitions'. In Milton's words at the end of his Greek-style tragedy *Samson Agonistes*, it leaves us

With peace and consolation...
And calm of mind, all passion spent.

In the words of the great film-director, Alfred Hitchcock,

Civilisation has become so screening and sheltering that we cannot experience sufficient thrills at first hand. Therefore, to prevent our becoming sluggish and jellified, we have to experience them artificially, and the screen is the best medium for this.

One need not agree with the last phrase, but Hitchcock's own films have certainly helped many people to feel the emotion of fear which (happily) is not often present in civilised life, and which people therefore seek not only in thrillers and tragedies, but also in dangerous sports like skiing, or climbing or fast driving. Aristotle's idea of tragedy as *catharsis* is one which modern man has no difficulty in understanding.

The other important question which Aristotle tried to answer in the *Poetics* was this: what kind of person ought the chief character (or hero or protagonist) of a tragedy to be? If he is a completely *bad* man it is clear that he will not get the sympathy of the reader or spectator: when he suffers or dies we shall not feel pity, but only satisfaction, as we do at the end of a thriller or detective story when the criminal is sent off to prison or the electric chair. If on the other hand he is a completely

good man we shall feel shocked and depressed by the thought that there is no justice in the world, and no just God in control of it. It is therefore difficult to disagree with Aristotle's decision that the protagonist in a tragedy ought to be 'good but not too good'—in other words he should be a person we can admire and like, but his suffering or death should be caused by his own fault, by some weakness in his character, or by some mistake which he himself has made. In *Hamlet* for example we feel that the young prince has a good character—kind, thoughtful, gentle and cultivated—yet in some ways weak and indecisive. It is his weakness and indecision which in the end cause his own death and that of several others. The word which Aristotle used for this kind of fault or weakness in an otherwise good character is *hamartia*. When he wrote the *Poetics* he was naturally thinking of Greek tragedy as he had seen it and read it, but his thoughts about *catharsis* and *hamartia* are relevant to *all* tragedy, as the reader will find by thinking carefully about the tragic plays or novels he has read.

Aristotle's thoughts about tragedy are of course those of a highly intelligent and sophisticated man. There is however another and more primitive point of view which helps to explain why we get pleasure from watching or reading about the suffering of others in tragedy. Anyone with the smallest knowledge of literature and drama before the beginning of the present century must have noticed how undemocratic it is. I said that the chief characters in Greek tragedy were always kings, queens and other people of importance: there was no place in it for ordinary people like you or me. This was equally true of the tragedies of Shakespeare and of other great European dramatists, though the German poet Lessing (1729-81) had written, and argued for, a more domestic type of drama. Even the nineteenth-century novel was usually written about people in 'high society'. Why has serious literature, and especially tragedy, always been so snobbish? Part of the answer was given by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* (see page 34) when he made the Monk say

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
As olde bookes maken us memorie,
Of him that stood in great prosperitee,
And is y-fallen out of heigh degree
Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

The idea of a tragedy as a moral story to show the falseness of human power and wealth is a very old one. It can be seen not only in the stories of ancient Greece, but also in Christian and Jewish history and

legend, where God is sometimes thought of as the great Leveller: 'He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek'. It must be admitted that many of us who are 'humble and meek' get a certain feeling of pleasure from seeing those who are clever and successful brought down to our own level. It is satisfying to think, in the words of John Bunyan's (1628-88) song, 'he that is down need fear no fall'; and to watch safely while heroes and leaders are, as we say, 'cut down to size'. Perhaps this is why so many tragedies have been written on the subject of Julius Caesar, and why, in our own time, the last days of Hitler and the fall of Mussolini have filled so many books and fascinated so many readers.

In modern drama however the theory of Chaucer's Monk no longer seems important. The protagonists in the plays of Ibsen, Shaw, Arthur Miller, John Osborne and Arnold Wesker are not kings or presidents or prime ministers. Even when a modern dramatist does choose a classical subject he does not usually emphasise the 'greatness' of his characters. On the contrary he tries to show that they are really very ordinary people, just like ourselves. Two good examples from modern French drama are Jean Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine* (about the Greek story of Oedipus) and Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*. To compare these with Sophocles's plays on the same subjects, *King Oedipus* and *Antigone*, is an instructive exercise for any student of literature.

It was in fact a study of Sophocles's *Antigone* which led the German philosopher and critic G. W. Hegel (1770-1831) to stress the importance of *moral conflict* in tragedy. The story can be told quite shortly: Antigone is the niece of Creon, king of Thebes. Her brother, Poly-nices, has been killed while leading an attack on that city, and Creon orders that his body is to remain unburied on the field. Recognising a religious and moral duty to bury her brother, Antigone goes out of the city at night and scatters earth over his body. Because she has broken the law, and in spite of the fact that she is going to be married to his son Haemon, Creon condemns Antigone to die. Haemon, having failed to persuade the king to change his mind, decides that he will die with her. In the end, persuaded by the old prophet Tiresias, Creon does change his mind, but it is too late. He finds that Antigone has already killed herself, and that Haemon is going to follow her example.

To Hegel it seemed that the *Antigone* was 'the perfect exemplar of tragedy'. The substance of all drama is conflict—conflict for example between the police and the criminal, the stupid father and the pretty young daughter, the American spy and the Russian spy. In such stories the conflict generally appears as a simple one between good and evil, right and wrong. In tragedy however things are less simple: the conflict is between two 'rights'. Antigone was caught between doing

the right thing, from a religious point of view, by giving proper burial to her brother, and doing the right thing, from the point of view of the law, by obeying Creon's order. Creon himself was caught between his duty as ruler and protector of the city, and his duty as the uncle and protector of Antigone. Such moral conflicts are a necessary part of life. Millions of Germans in the 1930s had to make the difficult choice between their duty as patriots to support the government and defend their fatherland, and their duty as Christians and Europeans to oppose the Nazi philosophy. Forty years later it is perhaps possible to see this as a simple conflict between right and wrong, but at that time it seemed a truly tragic conflict between two rights. Perhaps the commonest example of such a conflict is that between love and duty—favourite subject of a thousand films and novels as well as of great tragedies like *Romeo and Juliet*. Tragedy then can almost always be seen as a *conflict*: not between right and wrong (for that is simply melodrama), but between two opposite rights. This seems quite plain as soon as one begins to think about it, and it is strange that no one seems to have mentioned it until Hegel pointed it out in his *Aesthetik*.

So far we have been thinking about the history and theory which lie behind European tragedy in general. To the student of English literature however tragedy means above all the tragedy of Shakespeare. At first sight this seems very different from classical Greek tragedy. The differences however are of form rather than of substance. I shall try to show later how the theories of Aristotle and of Hegel, as well as the primitive idea of tragedy as the downfall of great men, can be helpful in understanding a Shakespearian tragedy (*Julius Caesar*). First however let us look at Shakespeare himself.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is such an important figure in world history that it is easy to forget how little is really known about his life. It is easy to forget also that he was only one of the many dramatists writing for the small London theatres at the time of Queen Elizabeth I. If anyone asked what made this young man from a small country town into the greatest literary figure the world has ever seen it would be difficult to give a short answer. He had three things however which everyone would agree about: an almost unbelievable understanding of human psychology (and this was a hundred years before even the word 'psychology' had been invented!); a God-like love and compassion for the world and its inhabitants; and a richness and control of language such as no other English writer has had. To these one must add, without taking away anything from Shakespeare's greatness, the element of luck and chance which is needed for success in any activity: he was born in the right place and at the right time.

England under Elizabeth I was as good a place to live in as anywhere in Europe. At last there was peace at home under a settled monarchy. The middle classes, to which Shakespeare's parents belonged, were generally prosperous. At last the full influence of the Renaissance (late coming to England because of the savage Wars of the Roses which had not ended until 1485) was being felt. Scholarship and poetry and music were flowering. Even the English aristocracy, late in following the example of their French and Italian cousins, were building great palaces like Hampton Court and Knole and Hatfield, and doing their best to encourage artists of every kind. One of Shakespeare's fellow-countrymen, admiring the great outpouring of poetry and music at the time, went so far as to call England 'a nest of singing birds'.

In such conditions a young poet-dramatist like Shakespeare could find an intelligent audience—an audience whose ears were open to poetry, and who were especially conscious of the beauty and wealth of their own language. In ordinary use that language was not very different from modern English (indeed according to the divisions usually made in the history of the language—Old English, Middle English and Modern English—it *was* Modern English!). There was however a great difference between the simple, direct speech of ordinary people and the 'clever', fantastical language of many of Elizabeth's courtiers. And this was very different from the language written by scholars, who were continually introducing new words from Latin and Greek. The very word 'theatre' for example was imported during Shakespeare's own lifetime as a 'clever' word for what he knew as a 'playhouse'. Even the ordinary noun 'animal' was then a new and 'clever' word for 'beast'.

Shakespeare himself used as many kinds of English as he needed. He particularly enjoyed making fun of the language of courtiers and scholars, and he liked making puns of a kind which would now seem childish. In short, Elizabethan English was extremely various and rapidly changing, and Shakespeare used it brilliantly. The result is that Shakespeare's English is quite difficult for the foreign reader (and indeed for many modern English readers). In the theatre the difficulties seem to disappear, so that the foreigner with a moderate knowledge of English can enjoy a performance in London or Stratford, even if he cannot translate the speeches into his own language. Perhaps the best advice, for those whose English is still uncertain, is not to attempt to read Shakespeare without the help of a good teacher. Alternatively it may be a good idea to study the play in translation in one's own language before trying it in English.

There is no room in a book like this to say anything of Shakespeare's

life. In any case, as I have said, we know very little about it except that he went from Stratford to London (leaving his wife at home) and became an actor. By the time he was thirty he had become well known as a dramatist. He was a successful dramatist, but no more so than some others of the time: indeed the critics thought he was inferior to Ben Jonson. Of the thirty-six plays which were almost certainly written by Shakespeare we shall only be concerned in this chapter with seven, namely the great tragedies written between 1598 and 1608: *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. It has always been the custom to divide Shakespeare's plays into comedies, histories, and tragedies. This is a useful arrangement, but is sometimes misleading. Some of the histories (*King Richard II* for example) are also tragedies, and the Roman tragedies (*Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*) are also histories. It is a little misleading, too, to call a darkly pessimistic play like *Troilus and Cressida* a comedy, but we need not discuss that here.

Like the other tragic dramatists of his time, Shakespeare followed a dramatic tradition which by then had become well established in England. This tradition came partly from the Roman tragic dramatist Seneca (died A.D. 65), and partly from the medieval 'mystery' plays which were still being acted in Shakespeare's boyhood, and which we shall be looking at more closely in another chapter. Seneca was a popular and highly successful writer of what we should now call thrillers. He specialised in stories of revenge, had no hesitation about showing bloody and horrible deeds on the stage, and frequently used ghosts in his stories. He owed something to the dramatic masterpieces of Greece; but, as sometimes happened when the Romans followed the Greeks in any artistic field, their plays were cruder, and altogether lacking in the dignity and high moral feeling of the Greeks. Seneca however was widely read and admired in England at the time of the Renaissance, and a number of tragedies were written in imitation of his style. Among these were *Gorboduc* (1551) by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, and *The Spanish Tragedy* (1589) by Thomas Kyd, each of which used the typically horrifying Senecan ingredients (and incidentally the Senecan convention of dividing the play into five acts).

Shakespeare, as a tragic dramatist, worked in this style, though his genius saved him from some of the crudity of the Senecan tradition. It was however from this tradition, added to the tradition of the English medieval plays and the actual conditions of the Elizabethan stage, that the Elizabethan drama took its form and structure. Unlike the great French tragedies of Corneille and Racine nearly a hundred

years later, it owed nothing in these respects to the drama of classical Greece. On the surface therefore we shall not expect a Shakespearean tragedy to look like the plays of Sophocles and Euripides. It is when we look beyond form and structure, and examine the subject matter, characters and ideas, that we shall see how universal is the material of tragedy, and how correctly Aristotle pointed out its essentials in the *Poetics*. To give examples of this I shall finish these notes on Shakespearean tragedy with a more detailed study of *Julius Caesar*. First however I shall make some short comments on his other chief tragedies.

Hamlet is so well known that there is no need to say much about it here. Like many of Shakespeare's plays it began as a rewriting of an older play by an unknown writer. We are not sure when it was first seen on the stage, but it was almost certainly earlier than 1603 when the first printed copy appeared. This copy was careless and incorrect, but a better edition was published in 1604. Basically *Hamlet* is a story of murder and revenge in the tradition of Seneca, not unlike Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (see page 56). All this is transformed by the poetry and the psychological insight of Shakespeare into a work of great genius—perhaps the most famous single work of literature in the world. It is the longest of Shakespeare's plays, and perhaps the most universal because it has something for everybody: the strange and powerful opening, with the soldiers watching the stars from the castle wall while they wait for the ghost to appear; the sad, almost sentimental, story of the young Ophelia; the violent action which bursts into the play from time to time (Laertes and his soldiers threatening King Claudius, Hamlet's sudden killing of Polonius, the duelling at the end); the discussion of religious and philosophical topics; the study of human relationships (husband-wife, lover-lover, parent-child, friend-friend, young-old); the sense of humour as a necessary part of life; and above all the immensely attractive, immensely complicated character of Hamlet himself, a character in which every one of us sees a reflection of himself. So many thousands of books have been written about *Hamlet* that one hesitates to say anything about it in so short a space. I would suggest however that its unending popularity is due above all to the fact that it puts before us the most important of all human problems: thought versus action. We are all like Hamlet in that the more we think the more difficult we find it to decide (which girl to marry, which party to vote for, which religion to follow, which job to take).

Othello (first acted in 1604, and printed in 1622) is the most 'domestic' of Shakespeare's tragedies. It is a story of sexual jealousy which he borrowed from an Italian writer, Cinthio. The fact that

Othello is a Moor (usually taken to mean a black African) married to a white girl, Desdemona, has led some people to think that *Othello* is a drama about 'the colour problem'. This is partly true, but the chief subject is the terrible effect of jealousy (carefully built up by Othello's evil lieutenant, Iago) on the honest, simple mind of the Moor—a man whose bravery and skill as a soldier have won the gratitude of the Venetian government, and Othello's appointment as governor of Cyprus (then a Venetian colony). The final scene, in which a half-mad Othello accuses the innocent Desdemona of being unfaithful and then smothers her with a pillow before killing himself, is one of the most impressive in Shakespeare.

King Lear was first acted in 1605, and printed in 1608. The story comes from the old English chronicles, and is almost entirely fictitious, though there may have been a real ancient British chieftain named Lear or Llyr. It is possible that the city of Leicester was originally Llyr-cestre or Lear's Castle. *King Lear* has been thought of by many critics as the most powerful of Shakespeare's tragedies. Certainly it is one of the most pessimistic. The story is complicated and extremely improbable, but it gives opportunities for some of Shakespeare's most impressive poetry. In the nineteenth century, when realistic scenery was the fashion in the theatre, it was thought that *King Lear*, with its innumerable changes of scene, its storms and its battles, was almost impossible to produce on the stage. Now that realism is out of fashion this is no longer so.

The story is chiefly concerned with the king and his three daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. He decides in old age that he will divide his kingdom between them in proportion to their love for him. Goneril and Regan please him by exaggerated and false expressions of love, but Cordelia (though truly loving her father) fails to do so. Lear is so angry with her that he divides the kingdom equally between Goneril and Regan (and their husbands, the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall), leaving Cordelia with nothing. Having control of the kingdom, Goneril and Regan soon forget their promises to care for their father, now old and powerless. Mad with rage at their ingratitude, he is driven out into the storm. Arriving at Dover after much suffering, he finds that a French army has landed there, and that Cordelia is with them, now married to the King of France. The scene in which the old man, confused, weak and almost at death's door, once again meets the only one of his daughters who truly loves him is one of the most emotional in all Shakespeare's work, and likely to draw tears from the most hard-hearted audience. Attended by Cordelia's servants and a doctor, Lear is carried into the royal tent where she greets him:

O, look upon me, sir,
And hold your hands in benediction o'er me:—
No, sir, you must not kneel.

Lear replies:

Pray, do not mock me:
I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you, and know this man;
Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is; and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.

But there is to be no happy ending: the French are defeated by the English under Albany and the treacherous Edmund. Cordelia is hanged by Edmund's order, and the play ends with Lear carrying her body on to the stage, where he himself dies. Meanwhile the evil-minded Goneril and Regan have quarrelled over their lover, Edmund. Goneril, having poisoned her sister, has also killed herself. Such a summary as this can do little justice to a tragedy on the massive scale of *King Lear*. It is one of Shakespeare's darkest and most powerful plays.

Macbeth is another 'dark' play, full of cruelty and blood, and more exciting than any thriller. The exact date of its first production is uncertain, but its Scottish subject and some other unmistakable evidence in the play itself make it clear that it was written to please the new King, James I, who was also James VI of Scotland. He had succeeded to the English throne on the death of Elizabeth in 1603. The story of *Macbeth* (which has some little historical fact behind it) was one of several which Shakespeare took from the *Chronicles* of Raphael Holinshed.

Macbeth and his wife, moved by the strange prophecy of the witches, kill the King of Scotland, Duncan, and seize the throne for themselves. Banquo, Macbeth's friend and fellow-general, knows of their crime, and so Macbeth decides that he also must be killed. He is struck down while returning from a ride with his son, Fleance. In a famous scene the ghost of Banquo appears to Macbeth at a feast to which all the

Scottish lords have been invited to mark the coronation of the murderous couple. Later Macbeth decides that Macduff also knows the truth about the old king's murder. He sends men to attack Macduff's castle and kill him, but Macduff, already warned, has escaped to England. His wife and children, left alone in the castle, are murdered by Macbeth's men.

By this time both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth realise that their guilt is known. Afraid of the future, Macbeth visits the witches in their cave. He is assured by them that he will never be harmed by 'man of woman born', and that he will rule Scotland 'till Birnam wood shall come to Dunsinane'. This for a time gives him confidence. He prepares to defend the castle of Dunsinane against the English, who have joined with Macduff and other Scottish leaders against the tyranny of the Macbeths.

Lady Macbeth's mind now begins to break under the pressure of guilt and anxiety. In the famous sleep-walking scene she relives the terrible night when she and her husband killed the sleeping Duncan. Soon afterwards, while Macbeth is preparing to meet Macduff and the English, she kills herself. There is an exciting scene in which a soldier tells Macbeth that he has actually seen Birnam wood moving. The audience knows (but Macbeth, of course, does not) that the English soldiers have been told to break branches from the trees in order to hide them as they attack.

Macbeth, believing now that supernatural powers are fighting against him, decides to fight to the end while still remembering the witches' promise that no man born of woman can harm him. At the height of the battle he comes face to face with Macduff. They fight savagely, Macbeth still certain that no human being can harm him. When they pause for breath he shouts to his opponent:

Thou lovest labour:
As easy mayst thou the intrenchant air
With thy keen sword impress, as make me bleed:
Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests;
I bear a charmed life, which must not yield
To one of woman born.

But Macduff replies:

Despair the charm;
And let the angel whom thou still hast served
Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely ript.

In other words Macduff had not been 'born of woman' in the ordinary sense, but by what is now called a Caesarian operation. Macbeth now realises that he has been tricked by the witches, and that there is no hope for him. His old bravery returns, and he fights desperately until Macduff kills him. The play ends with the arrival of more English forces, accompanied by Malcolm, Duncan's son, who is now true king of Scotland.

Summarised in this way *Macbeth* sounds almost like a crude Wild West melodrama. In fact it is a deep psychological study of a brave and sensitive man destroyed by his own ambition and a too-dominant wife. It is also one of the most poetic of Shakespeare's plays.

✓✓ *Antony and Cleopatra* was written about 1606, but not published until the 'First Folio' (1623), seven years after Shakespeare's death. The Folio was a collection of nearly all his plays put together by his friends and fellow-actors, John Heming and Henry Condell. For the story of *Antony and Cleopatra*, as for his other Roman plays, Shakespeare used Sir John North's translation of the Greek writer Plutarch (first century A.D.) who wrote the life stories of famous Greeks and Romans. Historically the events in *Antony and Cleopatra* followed almost immediately after those in *Julius Caesar*, and Antony is a central figure in both. Artistically however there is no connection between the plays.

It is not easy to summarise *Antony and Cleopatra* without a long explanation of the political situation at the time (about 30 B.C.). Its main subject is the love of the famous and powerful Roman for the traditionally beautiful Egyptian queen. Forced by political events and the death of his wife in Rome, Antony leaves Cleopatra in Alexandria and goes back to Rome. For political reasons he marries again, this time the sister of his former opponent, Octavius Caesar. Unable to live away from Cleopatra he soon leaves Rome and his wife, and returns to Alexandria. This causes war between Rome and Egypt. The Egyptian fleet is defeated at the battle of Actium, and soon afterwards Antony's army is also defeated at Alexandria. Cleopatra has taken refuge in her 'monument', and there is a false rumour that she is dead. Hearing this, Antony tries to kill himself by falling on his sword. Failing, he is carried to Cleopatra's monument where he dies in her arms. Octavius, leading the Roman forces, tries to make peace with Cleopatra. She pretends to agree, but has secretly decided to kill herself. This she does by putting an asp (a poisonous snake) to her breast. There is some magnificent poetry in *Antony and Cleopatra*, especially in the death scenes, but it has not quite the same power and psychological depth as Shakespeare's other tragedies. ✓

Like *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* was not printed until the Folio of 1623, though written about 1608. The story, which also came from

Plutarch, is about Caius Marcius, a Roman general who defeated the Volscians and captured the town of Corioli. In gratitude the Roman government gave him the surname Coriolanus, and wished also to make him Consul. The ordinary people of Rome however very much disliked his dictatorial arrogance (which is understandable when one reads the play, because Shakespeare shows him as a proud and insolent man who seems to go out of his way to express hate and contempt for the ordinary man). Popular feeling against Coriolanus forces the government to banish him from Rome, and he goes away in anger to join his former enemy, the Volscian leader, Aufidius. He agrees to lead the Volscian army against Rome, but when he is about to attack the city the Roman government send his friends and his family, including his mother Volumnia, to meet him and persuade him to make peace. In an emotional scene he listens to their prayers, and agrees. (The situation here is a good example of Hegel's theory of conflict between two goods: the hero's love of his own city and family, and his duty to keep his promise to the Volscians, even though that promise was one which he ought not to have made.) He leads the Volscian army back to their city of Antium, where he is killed by the Volscian leaders who feel that he has deceived them. *Coriolanus* is an interesting play in spite of its rather unattractive protagonist. It may be contrasted with *Macbeth*: in the latter we begin by admiring the protagonist, but find his character worsening as the play goes on; in *Coriolanus* we begin by disliking and end by admiring him.

I have chosen *Julius Caesar* (probably acted in 1599, but not printed until the Folio of 1623) as an example of Shakespearean tragedy for rather more detailed study. The chief reason for this choice is personal: *Julius Caesar* is one of my favourite plays. But it has other advantages for our present purpose: its language (though far from easy for a foreign reader) is by no means as difficult as that of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*; it is a popular play for study at school, so there is a good chance that the reader will know something about it already; it can be seen in at least one excellent film version; and it shows quite clearly most of the structural and psychological features of tragedy which we have been discussing.

Looked at from the Aristotelian point of view, or indeed from the point of view of any reader or spectator of common sense, the play is, despite its title, the tragedy of Brutus. He is the protagonist, the tragic hero, 'good but not too good', towards whom our sympathies are directed. When, after their defeat at Philippi and the death of his friend and ally Cassius, Brutus throws himself upon the sword held by his unwilling slave, we feel in full measure the emotions of pity and fear of which Aristotle wrote. We echo the words of Mark Antony,

‘This was the noblest Roman of them all.’ All through the play it is the nobility of Brutus which Shakespeare has worked to emphasise. His natural leadership, his devotion to the good of Rome, his thoughtful and humane character, his open generosity to his enemies, his love of his wife, and his kindness and consideration for servants—all these go to complete the picture of a man who is morally good and great:

His life was gentle; and the elements
So mixt in him, that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, ‘This was a man!’

That such a man should come in the end to defeat and death as a result of chance or accident would be shocking rather than truly tragic; for (as we have seen) the downfall of a wholly good man is as unsatisfactory in tragedy as that of a wholly bad man. If we are to identify ourselves with the hero, and feel tragic pity at his fate, he should be shown as a man suffering and brought to ruin by some weakness or flaw in an otherwise good character. This flaw is Aristotle’s *hamartia*, which has already been explained (see page 52). In the case of Brutus the *hamartia* grows out of his very virtues: he is himself so good and so honest that he finds it impossible to believe that other people may be different. Thus, for all his greatness of soul, he is a bad judge of character, and a rather stupid politician.

After Caesar’s death he accepts Antony’s offer of friendship at its face value, and allows him, despite the warnings of Cassius, to make a public speech at Caesar’s funeral. With almost incredible foolishness he assures Cassius that all will be well, because he himself will speak first, and give the people full and satisfactory reasons for Caesar’s death. And before this he has, on the highest moral grounds, refused to listen to the suggestions of Cassius and the rest of the anti-Caesar party that Antony and others of Caesar’s closest supporters should be killed at the same time:

Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius,
To cut the head off, and then hack the limbs.

Even on the battlefield he sets morality above military need, and condemns an important and useful officer, Lucius Pella, for accepting bribes. Cassius complains that the situation is too dangerous to allow of such strict morality,

In such a time as this it is not meet
That every nice offence should bear his comment—

but he is overruled once again by a Brutus determined to behave correctly at all costs. Thus, while we are moved to pity by Brutus's tragic end, we are all the time made aware that it is caused by his own fault.

If, as I have tried to show, Brutus is an example of the tragic hero as described by Aristotle, the whole of *Julius Caesar* is an example of his general ideas on tragedy. Pity and fear are in his opinion the primary tragic emotions, and these are naturally aroused by the terrible events which make up the action of the play. The atmosphere of fear built up by the storm, the visions of the 'ghastly women', the dead rising from their graves, the strange battle in the clouds 'which drizzled blood upon the Capitol'—all these are the background to the butchery of Caesar 'Even at the base of Pompey's statue, which all the while ran blood'. Shakespeare does not hesitate to stress the physical horror of the deed by reminding us many times of the wounds and the blood.

Long before Aristotle the Greeks had developed the moral of *themis* and *nemesis* which I have already mentioned. *Themis* means something like moral order or natural law, and the man who defied it was punished in the end by natural justice or fate (*nemesis*). The greatest crime a man could commit was the crime of *hubris* (or excessive pride), whereby he set himself up as an equal of the gods. This is the crime of Caesar, and Shakespeare emphasises it in his last speech, where he compares his own strength and constancy with the weakness of ordinary men. Yet within a few seconds he is struck down, and when Antony comes in 'the foremost man of all the world' is no more than a dead body:

O mighty Caesar! does thou lie so low?
Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils,
Shrunk to this little measure?

So *hubris* is punished, and the gods take their revenge on the man who dared to set himself up as their equal; or (for those who prefer a more cynical interpretation) the sub-conscious jealousy which we feel towards men greater and more powerful than ourselves is satisfied; and when we exclaim 'How are the mighty fallen!' we do so not with regret, but with scarcely concealed satisfaction. But the beginning of

the fourth act of *Julius Caesar* brings in a reversal of the situation—what Aristotle called *peripeteia*: it is now Brutus and his fellow conspirators who are the hunted, and Caesar's friends who are the hunters,

And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry Havoc, and let slip the dogs of war.

The last two acts show Brutus's tragic qualities in a magnified form. In difficulty and danger his goodness shines more brightly than ever; on the other hand his weaknesses become more and more clear. His high principles blind him to the realities of the situation, and he shows a foolish disregard for the opinions of Cassius, wasting time and energy in argument as to which of them is the more experienced soldier. Everything depends upon their making the right military decisions before beginning the battle with Octavius and Antony. Cassius wants to remain where they are, so allowing the enemy to exhaust themselves by marching towards them. Brutus wants to advance towards Philippi because (he thinks) they will be able to strengthen their army by enlisting more soldiers on the way. By the force of his personality he overrules the objections of Cassius, and finally has his way. The result is the destruction of their army and the death of both leaders. As the body of Brutus is carried off the field by Octavius's men our hearts echo Antony's words, 'This was the noblest Roman of them all'; but our heads remind us that this was also the man who, by his inability to understand that morality must sometimes bend, brought defeat and death to himself and thousands of others.

So far we have been looking at *Julius Caesar* in the light of Aristotle's ideas of tragedy, particularly with reference to Brutus as the tragic protagonist; but the play also illustrates very clearly Hegel's idea that tragedy arises out of a moral conflict of some kind. The conflict in the mind of Brutus is made quite clear in the first two acts and part of the third: his personal friendship for Caesar, conflicts with his belief that Caesar's power is a danger to Roman democracy. Brutus's devotion to the latter is continually emphasised, not only in what others say about him, but also in his own conversation with Cassius:

If it be aught towards the general good,
Set Honour in one eye and Death i' the other,
And I will look on both indifferently.

Thus there is no doubt in Brutus's mind (or in ours as spectators) that he has a moral and political duty to do all he can to end Caesar's personal power. The only way is by his death. But Shakespeare has also emphasised the fact that Caesar loves and trusts Brutus. Brutus can only do his duty as a political leader by breaking the sacred rules of friendship and trust. Being the kind of man he is, Brutus decides in favour of public duty and against personal loyalty. One of the most agonising moments in all tragedy occurs when the dying Caesar recognises his trusted friend as one of his murderers, and cries out the words given to him by tradition and by Plutarch, '*Et tu, Brute!*'

We may also see the moral conflict in terms of private morality versus political morality. I have already suggested that almost every decision Brutus takes proves to be a wrong decision in the sense that it leads to the failure of his own policy. Yet judged by the standards of private morality each decision was right: in this sense it was right to spare Mark Antony; right to allow him to pay due honour to the fallen Caesar; and right to condemn Lucius Pella for abusing his authority and taking bribes. It is often said by moralists that a deed which is in itself evil does not become good merely because it is intended as a means to some good end. It is this principle that Brutus acts upon with such disastrous results.

What makes *Julius Caesar* a tragedy, and a great tragedy, is that it deals with problems of character and morality that belong not only to Shakespeare's time, or Caesar's time, but to the whole of mankind at all times. It is a play of action in every sense of the word, and this illustrates the truth of Aristotle's description of tragedy as 'an imitation of *an action* that is important, entire, and of a proper magnitude'. A great many plays of our own time (and especially some of those written for television) seem to be little more than tedious and not-very-intelligent philosophical discussions. It is appropriate therefore that we should end our examination of *Julius Caesar* with a reminder that the heart of tragedy, and indeed of all drama, is *action*.

Most people would agree that the great period for English drama was the time of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and James I (1603-25). For readers who know little of English history it should be explained that the term Elizabethan is often used rather carelessly to include also the reign of James I, which should correctly be called Jacobean. Historians also talk of the Tudor period (from Henry VII to Elizabeth) and the Stuart period (from James I to Charles II, broken by the Commonwealth and Cromwell's dictatorship). I am using the phrase 'Elizabethan tragedy' to include any tragedies written between about 1550 and 1630.

The tragedies written by Shakespeare were of such importance

that we easily forget the other great tragic dramatists of the time, several of whom, at their best, were not greatly inferior to him. Ben Jonson (see page 184) was chiefly a writer of comedies, and we shall hear more of him later. He did however write one tragedy, *Sejanus*, which is comparable to Shakespeare's Roman plays, and which (though now rarely acted) was distinguished by having Shakespeare as one of the actors in its first production in 1603. There are two other Elizabethan tragic dramatists who must be mentioned, even if we have no time to study them closely. They are Christopher Marlowe and John Webster.

Marlowe was born in 1564 (the same year as Shakespeare) and was killed in rather mysterious circumstances in 1593. During his short life he wrote at least five tragedies and a number of poems and translations. He angered many powerful people by his atheism, yet he seems also to have worked as a secret agent for the government. Four of Marlowe's tragedies can be counted among the great works of the English stage, and they are still acted quite frequently. In *Tamburlaine* (1590) he showed considerable strength and originality both in choice of subject and in his use of blank verse. *Tamburlaine* (more correctly Timur-leng) was the Scythian shepherd and bandit who built a great empire in Asia in the late Middle Ages, finally conquering much of India and setting up the Mogul dynasty. To use such a subject (rather than one from classical Rome or from British history) was in itself the sign of an original and independent mind. To treat it as Marlowe did with a new and splendid kind of poetry was to bring new life to the English stage. *Tamburlaine* (which consists of two separate plays, Part I and Part II) is full of colourful scenes of the sort we now see in film spectacles: the Turkish emperor Bajazet kept prisoner in a cage and eventually killing himself by beating his head against the bars; the four Asian kings dragging *Tamburlaine's* chariot into Babylon; the death of his beloved Zenocrate.

✓ If *Tamburlaine* shows us a man mad for political power, Marlowe's second play, *The Tragical History of Dr Faustus*, shows us one equally mad for intellectual power. Its subject is the well-known legend of Faust's bargain with Mephistophilis—a legend which had attracted artists and poets for a thousand years before Goethe's masterpiece. Marlowe's *Faustus* is not a tragic masterpiece—indeed it is badly constructed, and spoiled by some childish comic scenes. Yet it contains much splendid poetry; and the final scene, in which *Faustus* waits for the striking of midnight and the dreaded arrival of Mephistophilis, is one of the most splendid and terrible in English literature. ✓

Marlowe's best play is certainly *Edward II*, which is comparable to Shakespeare's best historical plays. The story is of a young and

irresponsible king who is destroyed by his own weakness and the treachery of his homosexual favourites. The scene in which Edward is murdered at Berkeley Castle is well known as a tragic and terrible one. Not only in this scene but in the whole of *Edward II* one is reminded of Shakespeare's *Richard II*. Both plays are concerned with the tragic fall of young men with a lot of power which they are not strong enough to carry. It has often been pointed out that all Marlowe's tragedies are about men whose minds are dominated by a single idea: with Tamburlaine it is power; with Faustus it is knowledge; and with Edward II it is homosexual friendship.

John Webster (1580-c1635) had little of Marlowe's poetic strength, but more skill as a dramatist. He wrote a number of comedies in co-operation with other dramatists, but is now chiefly remembered for two tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. The stories of both come from Italian *novelle* (long short stories), and they have much of the dramatic energy and the horror of *Macbeth*. They are thrillers which continue the Senecan tradition in English tragedy, yet they appear very modern when read or seen on the stage.

The field of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy is so wide and so rich that it is impossible to treat it fairly in a few pages. The few dramatists I have chosen would, I think, be accepted by most people as being the most important, but there are others (Tournear, Middleton and Ford for example) who might equally well have been chosen.

The *Samson Agonistes* of Milton (see page 30) stands quite alone in the history of English drama, being written strictly in the style of a classical Greek tragedy. Milton believed (as he wrote in his preface) that tragedy was, and always had been, 'the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems'. In his puritanical way he thought that the English stage had become immoral, and that Shakespeare and the other great dramatists of his generation had been wrong in not following classical models. He took care to explain that he did not intend *Samson* for the stage: it is a play for reading rather than acting (though in fact it has been acted several times and, in my opinion, ought to be done again). The subject comes from the Biblical *Book of Judges*. Milton follows all the 'rules' of Greek tragedy (including the use of a chorus). The language, as always in Milton, is difficult, but the ideas and the philosophical problems discussed are of great interest, as I have often found (to my surprise) while reading the play with students.

Samson Agonistes was written near the end of Milton's life, when he was blind and suffering for the political part he had played in Cromwell's dictatorship, so there was a close parallel between his own condition and that of his hero, Samson. The Restoration (of the monarchy after the death of Cromwell, Charles II having returned

from his French exile in 1660) brought new life to literature and the arts, which had suffered badly under Cromwell's puritanical rule. Theatres, which had been closed for several years, came to life again with the flowering of 'restoration comedy'. Comedy suited the mood of the times better than tragedy, but there were still some successful tragedies, like Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved*, produced in 1682, and John Dryden's *All for Love*, which had appeared in 1678.

Dryden (see page 156) was the greatest literary figure of the time, and *All for Love, or The World well lost* was a tragedy on the same subject as *Antony and Cleopatra*. As a play it is probably better constructed than the latter, but Dryden had little of Shakespeare's poetic power. In his *Essay on Dramatic Poesie* he had argued in favour of 'modern' tragic drama (represented by Shakespeare and the other Elizabethans) against the 'classical', imitation Greek drama then being written in France.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a bad time for tragic drama in England. It was not that the theatres were idle or empty—indeed there were many famous actors and actresses who kept alive the great tragedies of the past. There was however a strange absence of dramatists. It seemed as if the great storm of energy that had created the Elizabethan and restoration drama had left everybody exhausted. Even the romantic revival failed to produce much dramatic writing, though one tragedy ought certainly to be mentioned: *The Cenci*, a verse tragedy by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). Shelley is one of the best known of the English romantic poets, but his dramatic work is sometimes forgotten. *The Cenci* (the title is the name of a great Roman family of the sixteenth century) could easily be mistaken for an Elizabethan or Jacobean play. It concerns the cruelty and madness of Francesco Cenci, who hated his children and attempted to commit incest with one of them (Beatrice). In despair Beatrice decides, with the help of her brother and her stepmother, to have Cenci killed. Afterwards, and in spite of much public sympathy, the three of them are condemned to death.

Except for Shelley in *The Cenci*, none of the great writers of the nineteenth century succeeded in producing a great tragic drama for the stage. Tennyson made several attempts, and so did Browning; but these are now mostly forgotten. It is hard to understand why a period so creative in other ways should have been so unproductive in this field: we can only assume that the old style of tragedy was worn out, and a new one was not yet discovered.

Of the tragedies I have mentioned so far in this chapter, the reader may have noticed that most—perhaps nine out of ten—are about important people. In other words the idea of Chaucer's Monk (see

page 52) that tragedy ought to be *de casibus virorum illustrium* (about the downfall of famous men) seems generally to have been accepted without question. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that people began to see that ordinary men and women were interesting, and that tragedy as well as comedy could be found in everyday life. It was chiefly the work of the great Norwegian, Ibsen (1828-1906), that made this clear. English translations of *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* and other plays showed that the theatre could be used for discussing the moral and social problems of real life in a modern setting. Since the end of the First World War there has been a succession of 'realistic' dramatists writing for the English theatre. It was fashionable in the 1950s to speak of 'kitchen-sink drama': I will return to this soon, but let us first look at the chief dramatist of the early part of our century, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950).

As an admirer of Ibsen, and one who did much to make Ibsen known in the English theatre, Shaw believed that drama should be concerned with philosophy, politics and social problems. Both *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methusaleh* are philosophical plays dealing with the 'life force' or 'creative evolution'—ideas which Shaw borrowed from the French philosopher Bergson (1859-1941). *Arms and the Man* is an amusing theatrical debate about pacifism and militarism; *Mrs Warren's Profession* is about prostitution and sexual morality; and *The Doctor's Dilemma* is a serio-comic play about the social responsibility of doctors. *The Apple Cart* (1929) is a political play in which Shaw seems to have foreseen the problems of the 1930s and the rise of the dictatorships. None of Shaw's plays could be called tragedies in the older sense: they deal with serious subjects, but they deal with them in a light-hearted way; there is much philosophical debate and discussion, and generally an absence of real human feeling. This is probably because Shaw himself was a man of intellect rather than a man of feeling—and to write tragic drama one needs to be both! To many people Shaw's most successful work is *Saint Joan* (1924). It is more than a historical 'chronicle play', more than a theatrical debate between nationalism and internationalism or protestantism and catholicism: indeed it is almost, but not quite, a true tragedy.

Although Shaw was an excellent and successful dramatist (if not quite a great one) he may be blamed for starting one fashion which has influenced the English theatre in the years since his death in 1950: I mean the fashion for using drama as propaganda. In the past the purpose of drama has been, in the words of Hamlet, 'to hold the mirror up to nature': to show life as it is, and perhaps in passing to suggest how it might be. Since Shaw some dramatists (and actors and producers and even pop singers) have set themselves up as 'pro-

phets', using the stage as a platform for spreading their own opinions about politics or religion or history. No one (certainly not I) would wish to stop dramatists saying what they like; but I believe many people dislike being preached at (as in church) without having an opportunity to reply. This however is a matter which readers must discuss for themselves: I only mention it here as a possible criticism of Shaw's influence and a possible explanation of the fact that very little tragic drama has been written in England in the twentieth century. Some of the most important was the work of John Galsworthy, whose novels we shall be discussing later (see page 133).

None of Galsworthy's plays perhaps could be called a tragedy in the old sense of the word, but some of them are fine examples of the drama of conflict. *Strife* for example analyses the conflict between the two sides in an industrial dispute (a coal-miners' strike); its subject is by no means out of date. Neither unfortunately is the subject of *Loyalties*, which is about anti-semitism. In *Escape* Galsworthy used what was then (1926) an unusual method of constructing a play: a number of short scenes connected only by the figure of the escaping prisoner who is its chief character. *Escape* is still an impressive play on the stage, as are all Galsworthy's tragic dramas.

Two other writers of the period between the wars must be mentioned in any account of the drama of the time. The first, R. C. Sherriff (born 1896), has generally been undervalued by critics because he wrote only one play of real importance: this was *Journey's End*, first produced in London in 1928. It would perhaps be misleading to describe *Journey's End* as a 'great' tragedy, but its strong mixture of realism and sentimentality made a great impact on millions of English people who had lived through the First World War. To the sons and daughters of such people it seemed strange and out-dated, its language almost comically so; but for their grandchildren, who think of that far-off war as a part of ancient history, it has a new interest, and has been revived on the stage recently. It can now be seen indeed as one of the most moving and powerful literary works to come out of the Great War.

Charles Morgan (1894-1958) was dramatic critic for *The Times*, and (perhaps for this reason) a rather self-conscious writer. *The Flashing Stream* and *The Burning Glass* had some success in the theatre, and they have a tragic seriousness which makes them worth reading. But they have little ordinary human feeling, and are written in a heavy sort of language which would sound strange on a modern stage, even though neither play is more than thirty years old.

Some of the most important tragic drama of the last fifty years has come from America, and although this book (for reasons of space)

is generally confined to *British* literature (see page 18) it would be impossible to write on modern drama without mentioning Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) and Arthur Miller (born 1915).

O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, like *Desire Under the Elms* and *Beyond the Horizon*, showed that he was a tragic dramatist of great power. These plays, written during the 1920s, were followed by *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), a successful attempt to 'translate' a Greek tragedy, the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, into modern terms, with the action set in nineteenth century America. Although O'Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936, his fame declined during the war years and little was heard of him until after his death. Since then his importance has again been recognised. *The Iceman Cometh*, written in 1946, was produced in New York and London during the 1950s; and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) has recently been revived in England with much success. It is now clear that O'Neill must be regarded as one of the greatest tragic dramatists of this century.

Arthur Miller has found, as Ibsen found, that real life and ordinary people can provide all the tragic material a dramatist needs. The subject of *Death of a Salesman* (1947) is one that must concern every human being in the so-called developed nations, namely the moral worthlessness of the lives most of us are forced to lead, and the difficulty of getting ourselves free from greed and dishonesty. Miller had treated a very similar subject in *All My Sons* (1947), but in *The Crucible* (1953) he went back to seventeenth-century America for a terrible story of witch-hunting. *The Crucible* is a powerful tragic drama however one sees it: seen (as Miller seems to have intended) as a parallel for Senator McCarthy's witch-hunt against so-called communists in America about that time, it has the force of a dreadful warning against fanaticism of all kinds.

It will be clear from what I have said of drama in the twentieth century that tragedy in the older sense of the word (tragedy as it was written by Sophocles and Shakespeare) has almost ceased to exist. There have been prose tragedies in the manner of Ibsen, and some poetic drama like James Elroy Flecker's *Hassan* (1922) or the plays of Christopher Fry (born 1907); but there is only one twentieth-century writer who would be recognised by almost everyone as a great tragic poet: I mean of course T. S. Eliot (1888-1965).

Murder in the Cathedral was first performed at Canterbury Cathedral in 1935, and it became clear that poetic tragedy was not dead, as so many people had supposed, but only asleep and waiting for the touch of a great poet to reawaken it. Like all great artists, Eliot borrowed largely from the past in order to produce a work that was brilliantly new. People who thought that modern English drama ought to be

like the plays of Shaw or Galsworthy were astonished and delighted. A detailed appreciation of *Murder in the Cathedral* would be impossible in the space of this chapter, but I hope that any readers who do not yet know it will try to read it as soon as possible, in spite of its many difficulties of language. It is worth mentioning perhaps that this is a play which should be read communally—possibly into a tape recorder—if it is to be properly appreciated. The tragic conflict in *Murder in the Cathedral* is between Becket's conscience (which he sees as his duty to God) and his duty to the state (in the person of Henry II). It has been said that Eliot's sympathies are too clearly with Becket, and that the play gives too much importance to his saintliness: I think this may be true, but we have to remember that Eliot was writing a tragedy, not a politico-philosophical essay. ✓

In *The Family Reunion* (1939) Eliot used some of the methods of classical drama in a play with a modern subject and setting. The subject is similar to that of the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, the protagonist Harry being pursued by the Eumenides (or 'Furies') who personify his own guilt for the death of his wife. *The Family Reunion* is an impressive tragic play, but I am not sure whether the strange mixture of modern characters and settings with classical 'rules' is altogether successful. To most people *The Cocktail Party* is a more interesting play, though it can hardly be called a tragedy.

Although today we do not seem to have any single dramatist as important as Shaw or Eliot, the modern English theatre is probably more alive than it has been since the time of Dryden. It is however a theatre of experiment, and nobody seems to have very clear ideas about the purpose of drama, or even whether it has a purpose. Dramatists like John Osborne, John Arden, Harold Pinter, Henry Livings, N. F. Simpson, Arnold Wesker and Tom Stoppard cannot be classified as 'tragic' or 'comic' writers in the old sense. It is probable indeed that tragedy of the Shakespearian or Schillerian type will never be written again: such tragedy, like the classical epic, belongs to the past. This of course is not the same as saying that it is dead. The best Greek tragedies, like the best Elizabethan tragedies, are much more alive than most of the plays written last year or the year before, but this does not mean that modern dramatists ought to imitate them. Indeed there is nothing that modern dramatists *ought* to do, and this is perhaps why English drama in the last fifteen years has been so interesting. We shall return to it in the chapters on comedy and satire.

To answer the question, 'What has happened to tragedy in the twentieth century?' would require a book much longer than this one. I can only answer it here by pointing to two plays which have achieved much success (both popular and critical) during the last few years.

Both of them are by Peter Shaffer (born 1926), and both can be read without much difficulty by anyone with a fair knowledge of English. *Five Finger Exercise* (produced in London in 1958) is a domestic tragedy with five characters: an English middle-class couple, their teenage son and daughter, and a young German who joins the family as the girl's tutor. The play, a study of family life at its worst, combines comic elements with a deeply tragic central theme. It is written and constructed (and this is the point I want to make) in much the same way as Galsworthy might have written it fifty years ago—or even Ibsen, still earlier. There is nothing new or experimental about it, yet it is a most effective tragic play. It is very different from Shaffer's other successful play, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1964). This is a tragedy in the sense that Marlowe understood the word; indeed it has much in common with *Tamburlaine*: many changes of scene, colourful costumes and a subject far away, both in time and place, from ordinary life. *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* is set in South America in the sixteenth century, and deals with the conquest of the Inca Empire by the Spaniards under the leadership of Pizarro. It is a powerful and tragic play which has been highly successful on the stage. As tragedy *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* is neither better nor worse than *Five Finger Exercise*: what is important is the fact that one dramatist can write, within the space of a few years, two plays so utterly different in style. Whatever Shaffer's own importance in the history of drama may be, his writing must be seen as typical of the free and experimental nature of tragedy in the twentieth century. We have come a long way from tragedy as the Greeks thought of it. Whether or not our tragedy will last as long as their tragedy is a question impossible to answer.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Lyrical and Reflective Poetry

One of the differences between science and the arts (including literature) is that scientific words have well-defined meanings, while 'artistic' words do not. When a biologist talks about enzymes for example I am sure that other biologists know exactly what he means, even if you and I do not. But when you and I talk about lyrical poetry, or lyrics, there is some risk that we will misunderstand each other. You may be thinking of something like Donne's sonnet, *Death, be not Proud*, while I am thinking of something like last year's winner of the Eurovision Song Contest. I shall therefore begin by explaining how I intend to use the word lyric and why I think a lyric is different from a reflective poem.

According to *The Oxford Dictionary* 'lyric' is 'now the name for a short poem, usually divided into stanzas...and directly expressing the poet's own thoughts or sentiments'. In ordinary language the word often means a song: the sort of song which was sung in ancient Greece to the music of the lyre, and which is sung in the modern world to the music of the guitar; but there are many lyrical poems which would be unsuitable for singing, just as there are many poems which 'express the poet's own thoughts or sentiments' without being lyrics at all. Pope's *Essay on Man* for example and Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* are too long to be called lyrical. They are also too 'thoughtful': the basic quality of a lyric is feeling rather than thought. Any poem of course must contain a mixture of both, but in lyrical poetry the feeling comes before the thought, as it does in Wordsworth's lines on the rainbow:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man:

So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die !
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

Or, less seriously, in this little poem by Leigh Hunt (1784-1859):

Jenny kissed me when we met,
Jumping from the chair she sat in;
Time, you thief that love to get
Sweets into your list, put that in!
Say I'm weary, say I'm sad,
Say that health and wealth have miss'd me,
Say I'm growing old, but add,
Jenny kissed me.

Both of the examples I have given are truly lyrical. Both of them as it happens express a similar feeling of joy. Both of them are very short. If Wordsworth had gone on (as of course he did in much of his poetry) to discuss the influence of natural beauty on the human spirit, or if Leigh Hunt had given us more of his thoughts about youthful happiness and the sadness of growing old, the lyrical feeling would have been lost. The poems might have been either better or worse, but they would have been reflective and not lyrical. A lyric then is a short poem about a feeling, an emotion or a single idea; a reflective poem is longer, more thoughtful and more complicated.

Unlike some forms of literature (such as epic or classical tragedy), which may seem to the modern reader to be 'dated', lyrical poetry is always very much alive. The love poems of Sappho and Alcaeus, from the sixth century before Christ, do not seem strange or out of date when one reads them in a modern translation—indeed one feels that they might have been written yesterday. The same is true of this singable little poem:

Merry Margaret
As midsummer flower,
Gentle as falcon
Or hawk of the tower:
With solace and gladness,
Much mirth and no madness,
All good and no badness;

So joyously,
So maidenly,
So womanly
Her demeaning
In every thing,
Far, far passing
That I can indite
Or suffice to write
Of merry Margaret
As midsummer flower,
Gentle as falcon
Or hawk of the tower.

I leave the reader to guess when it was written. (If he cannot guess he might like to look at the note on page 105.)

Because human nature changes very little and very slowly, it is not surprising to find that the subjects of lyrical poetry have remained the same for century after century. Love has always been the favourite: the love between man and woman, or girl and boy, seems to have been just as delightful and just as troublesome to the poets of Persia and Greece three thousand years ago as it is to the poets of Düsseldorf and Liverpool today. Other kinds of love have also provided inspiration for the lyric poet: the love between God and man for example or man's love for the beauty of nature. Later on we shall be looking at various examples of lyrical poetry on these subjects, and on those sadder and darker subjects which have also inspired poets: hatred, fear, grief and death. First however I intend to discuss four quite different poetic methods, each of which has been widely used by English lyrical and reflective poets. These methods may conveniently be called direct, intellectual (or metaphysical), formal and musical. I shall try to explain each of them in turn.

The short poems I have already quoted are good examples of the 'direct' type of lyric. They give us the poet's experience, and the feeling connected with it, in the shortest and simplest form. They are easy to read and understand, but immensely difficult to write. They seem to come directly from the heart of the writer and to go straight to the heart of the reader, with the smallest possible interference from the mind. But I say 'seem' because of course the simplicity is deceptive: it cannot be achieved without a great deal of deep thought by the poet. Many more examples of the simple and direct lyric will probably be known to the reader already: Browning's *Home Thoughts from Abroad* for example or Masfield's *Sea Fever* or Yeats's *Lake Isle*

of *Innisfree*—all three of which express in the simplest, yet most powerful way the feeling of love and longing for places. I have chosen two less-known examples, both by Thomas Hardy (see page 124). One of them expresses the deep sadness which Hardy so often felt to be at the heart of human life, the other is in a brighter, less pessimistic mood.

'Are you Digging on my Grave?'

- 'Ah, are you digging on my grave,
My loved one?—Planting rue?'
—'No, yesterday he went to wed
One of the brightest wealth has bred.
"It cannot hurt her now," he said,
"That I should not be true."'
- 'Then who is digging on my grave?
My nearest, dearest kin?'
—'Ah, no: they sit and think, "What use!
What good will planting flowers produce?
No tendance of her mound can loose
Her spirit from Death's gin."'
- 'But someone digs upon my grave?
My enemy?—prodding sly?'
'Nay: when she heard you had passed the Gate
That shuts on all flesh soon or late,
She thought you no more worth her hate,
And cares not where you lie.'
- 'Then who is digging on my grave?
Say—since I have not guessed!'
'O, it is I, my mistress dear,
Your little dog, who still lives near,
And much I hope my movements here
Have not disturbed your rest?'
- 'Ah, yes! *You* dig upon my grave...
Why flashed it not on me
That one true heart was left behind!
What feeling do we ever find
To equal among human kind
A dog's fidelity!'

' Mistress, I dug upon your grave
To bury a bone, in case
I should be hungry near this spot
When passing on my daily trot.
I am sorry, but I quite forgot
It was your resting place.'

If you find, as I do, that it is impossible to read this poem without tears, you will agree that Hardy has succeeded completely in his purpose. You may feel, as I also do, that he is mistaken in thinking that the dead are so easily forgotten, and in seeing no Christian hope in the situation he describes. We all know though that there are times when the world seems utterly black—love and friendship seem worthless. This sad feeling has inspired thousands of poems, including many long reflective ones like Gray's *Elegy*. Very few of them have the direct and powerful effect of these simple lines. Hardy could have borrowed from the old ballads this idea of a conversation between two voices, unbroken by phrases like 'he said' or 'she answered'. Indeed the whole poem, with its direct language and absence of any commentary or reflection from the poet himself, is certainly ballad-like. Not many ballads however are constructed as cleverly as *Are you Digging on my Grave?*, with its careful building up to a climax in the fifth stanza: 'My lover, my friends, my relations', thinks the dead woman, 'have all forgotten me, even my enemy has forgotten me, but at least my little dog remembers me!' This might have been the climax of a pleasantly sentimental and rather ordinary little poem about the goodness and fidelity of animals. But then comes the bigger anti-climax: the dog too, until that moment, had forgotten where his mistress was lying!

The second Hardy poem I want to quote is of a very different kind. The feeling it expresses is so common, so very ordinary, that one might wonder whether it is worth expressing at all. It is well known however that English people love to talk about the weather. Why then should an English poet not tell us that he likes it to be fine, and hates it to be wet?

Weathers

This is the weather the cuckoo likes,
And so do I;
When showers betumble the chestnut spikes,
And nestlings fly:

And the little brown nightingale bills his best,
And they sit outside at 'The Travellers' Rest',
And maids come forth sprig-muslin dressed,
And citizens dream of the south and west,
And so do I.

This is the weather the cuckoo shuns,
And so do I;
When beeches drip in browns and duns,
And thresh, and ply;
And hill-hid tides throb, throe on throe,
And meadow rivulets overflow,
And drops on gate-bars hang in a row,
And rooks in families homewards go,
And so do I.

Weathers is so simple and direct that it is easy to miss the artistic skill which has gone into its composition. Not only is the rather complex verse pattern made to appear easy and neat, but the 'imagery'—the little pictures the poet has chosen to express the contrasting feelings of summer and autumn—make an immediate effect in the mind of anyone who knows the everyday scenes of the English countryside: the chestnut trees in flower, the girls in their summer dresses, the people sitting in the sunshine outside the village pub; and (in contrast) the wet brown trees in the autumn winds, and the little streams flashing in the rain-soaked fields.

I said earlier that the favourite subject of lyric poets has always been love. In one sense of course *Weathers* is a poem about love: it is about love of nature, love of one's country, and not love of a person. Here is an example of a love lyric in the more usual sense of the word. It is indeed one of the most famous of all love songs:

A Red Rose

O, my love is like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June.
O, my love is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonny lass,
So deep in love am I,

And I will love thee still, my dear,
Till all the seas gang dry.

Till all the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun!
And I will love thee still, my dear,
While the sands of life shall run.

And fare thee well, my only love!
And fare thee well a while!
And I will come again, my love,
Tho' it were ten thousand mile.

Robert Burns (1759-96) who wrote this was of course an English poet only in the sense that he wrote in the English language. Some of his work (but not the best) is written in the English of his time; most however is in a Scottish dialect which foreign readers might find difficult. (This is a pity because *Tam o'Shanter* is one of the best, and most amusing, of British narrative poems.) Fortunately *A Red Rose* is easy to understand, and to make it easier still I have altered the spelling in one or two places. It is the most 'purely' lyrical poem I know: in other words, it seems to me that it is poetry entirely of the heart, and not at all of the intellect; it is what Wordsworth called 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. However much labour and skill may in fact have gone into it, it gives the impression of having come straight from the heart. This directness and simplicity marks much of the greatest lyrical poetry of the world.

But it would be quite wrong to think that *all* good lyrical poetry must be simple and direct. Some of it is highly intellectual and complicated, can only to be understood after several readings and is quite unsuitable for singing to a lyre or a guitar. Poetry of this kind, some of which we shall be looking at in a minute, is much more than 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. Indeed, as Wordsworth well knew, such 'powerful feelings' do not usually overflow into poetry at all. When the baby screams for his bottle, or when I cut myself with my old-fashioned, non-electric razor, the noises we make are certainly 'a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion'. But they are not poetry. Wordsworth (in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*) went on to say that poetry 'takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity'—a phrase which has become well known to everybody who reads or thinks about English literature. He meant that feelings and emotions cannot make poetry by themselves—they must be

remembered in quietness, and worked upon by the mind in order to find the best ways of expressing them. The lyrics we have looked at in the last few pages were certainly not composed without much hard work and thought, but this does not show. Indeed it was the poets' intention that it should *not* show because they wanted to give an effect of directness and simplicity.

The poem I wish to examine now is quite different. Here the writer's mind plays such an important part that the reader, if he is not careful, loses sight of the feeling which is being expressed. It is, in this poem, the same feeling that Burns expresses in the last stanza of *A Red Rose*:

And fare thee well, my only love!
And fare thee well awhile!
And I will come again, my love,
Tho' it were ten thousand mile.

but this poet (I will tell you his name later) is a 'metaphysical'.

Let me pour forth
My tears before thy face, whilst I stay here,
For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear,
And by this mintage they are something worth,
For thus they be
Pregnant of thee;
Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more,
When a tear falls, that thou fall'st which it bore,
So thou and I are nothing then, when on a divers shore.

On a round ball
A workman that hath copies by, can lay
An Europe, Afrique and an Asia,
And quickly make that which was nothing, All;
So doth each tear
Which thee doth wear
A globe, yea world by that impression grow,
Till thy tears mixt with mine do overflow
This world, by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolved so.

O more than Moon,
Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere,
Weep me not dead, in thine arms, but forbear
To teach the sea what it may do too soon;

Let not the wind
 Example find,
 To do me more harm than it purposeth;
 Since thou and I sigh one another's breath,
 Whoe'er sighs most, is cruellest, and hastes the other's death.

No one needs to feel ashamed if he finds it impossible to understand this at a first reading. It is in fact quite a difficult poem, though not nearly as difficult as many others by the same writer. The important thing to notice about it however is that its difficulty is not the same as the difficulty we find in so many bad poems. We do not need an encyclopaedia to seek out any far-fetched allusions it contains because, difficult though it is, the poem is self-explanatory. The writer made a hard intellectual effort in composing it, and he expects the reader to make a similar effort in understanding it. It is difficult, I think, for two reasons: first because the ideas it contains are rather odd and unexpected; and secondly because it packs a great deal of meaning into a short space. If the reader tries, as he should, to make a prose 'translation' of it, he will find that he needs a great many more words than this poet uses.

The poet is John Donne (1571-1631). He called his poem *A Valediction: of weeping*. The occasion of its being written was his departure from his wife before starting a sea voyage. He refers to this in the last stanza, where he links the ideas of tears and sea, sighs, and wind. There is nothing very original in writing a poem about tears; indeed the tears of lovers flow freely and often boringly through all the world's lyrical poetry. What we notice here is the way in which Donne's quick and brilliant mind plays with a single idea, lighting it up by a quick succession of new ideas: first his tears are 'coins', stamped with the portrait (or reflection) of his wife's face; then they are 'pregnant', bearing the portrait as the tear-shaped womb bears a child; then they are 'fruits' of sadness, then 'worlds', and finally they are salt 'tides', drawn up by the moon. In the first stanza every tear that falls changes the lovers into nothing, because its fall extinguishes the reflected portrait it carries: 'When a tear falls, that *thou* fall'st which it bore'. In the last stanza every sigh is an encouragement to the wind to blow hard, and so make the poet's voyage rough and dangerous. The speed with which one idea follows another is dazzling and confusing, so that one has to read the poem with close attention in order to get its full meaning. Poetry of this kind is generally called metaphysical. Donne was the most important of a number of metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century.

If the reader thinks that such poetry is difficult, unattractive and

unsuitable for the subject of love, he can find at least one important critic who agrees with him. John Dryden (see page 156), who was born in the year Donne died (1631), thought that the metaphysical style was heavy and out of date. He blamed Donne for using it in his love poetry, complaining that he 'perplexed the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy when he should engage their hearts and entertain them with the softness of love'. Writing nearly a hundred years later Samuel Johnson (see page 234) made the same sort of complaint. Donne and the other metaphysical poets were, he said, 'more desirous of being admired than of being understood'.

It was Johnson, in his *Life* of the poet Cowley (1618-67), who first used the word metaphysical in this special sense. It has now become the accepted word for this kind of poetry, and when an English critic or teacher talks about the metaphysicals he means not only Donne and Cowley, but a whole group of poets of the seventeenth century who wrote in this style. The metaphysicals were, in their own time, modern and revolutionary. They wanted to get away from ideas and language which seemed to them old-fashioned and worn out. This is something which any intelligent writer must feel: as soon as a style becomes popular it begins to become boring, as any student of modern pop lyrics knows. In Shakespeare's time the writers of love lyrics had got into the habit of using the same comparisons over and over again. The girl-friend always seemed to have the same kind of beauty: eyes as bright as the sun, a mouth as red as coral, breasts as white as snow, hair like golden wire, a complexion like roses, breath as sweet as perfume, a voice like music and the general appearance of a goddess. Shakespeare himself had protested against such mass-produced comparisons in his sonnet CXXX:

My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red:
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun,
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go,—
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground;
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

Donne (only seven years younger than Shakespeare) was even more determined to finish with the old, worn-out comparisons. Hundreds of poets no doubt had likened a pair of lovers to a pair of doves. No one before Donne had thought of likening them to a pair of compasses: the woman remaining still at the centre, the man travelling out and around the circumference, but always coming back to the centre in the end. By trying too hard to be original or modern, the metaphysical poets sometimes became silly. One (without intending to be laughable) described the tear-filled eyes of Mary Magdalene as

Two walking baths, two weeping motions;
Portable and compendious oceans.

Another compared his lover's heart not to a fluttering bird or a trembling leaf, but to a small bomb or grenade:

Woe to her stubborn heart, if once mine come
Into the self-same room;
'Twill tear and blow up all within,
Like a grenado shot into a magazine.

Donne himself was too intelligent and too good a poet to sink into this sort of absurdity. A poem like *A Valediction: of weeping* may seem at first sight to have too much brain and too little heart, but as one studies it one becomes more and more impressed by its sincerity. No one who reads such poems as *The Apparition*, *The Relique*, *Go and catch a falling star*, *Death, be not proud*, or *Batter my heart, three personed-God* could possibly think that Donne's poetry was without feeling. He is probably the best example in English of a poet whose lyrical feeling is perfectly balanced and disciplined by his brain.

The fashion for metaphysical poetry did not last long after the end of the seventeenth century. Then for two hundred years it was almost forgotten; even Donne was only read (if he was read at all) because his poetry seemed odd or quaint. In the first quarter of the present century however the metaphysicals suddenly became fashionable again. Modern poets and critics (unlike romantic poets) began to see that feeling and thought in poetry could not be separated. Introducing a book called *The New Poetry* in 1962 Professor Alvarez wrote, 'Since Freud, the late romantic dichotomy between emotion and intelligence has become totally meaningless'. It is certainly true that the best poets of the twentieth century (Eliot and Auden in particular)

have been closer to the metaphysicals than to poets like Wordsworth or Burns. It might be said (rather unkindly) that the simple, direct, emotional lyric is now so much a part of pop culture that serious and 'bookish' poets dare not attempt it.

One poet of our own time who writes in a style resembling the metaphysical style is Ted Hughes (born 1930). His poems have something of the emotional force of D. H. Lawrence's, and he has the cleverness of Donne in inventing means to express it. The poem quoted here, *Vampire*, seems to me (whatever Hughes may have intended) to express a feeling which is well known to all but the very young and the very good-tempered: namely the desperate and unreasonable hate, even fear, which it is possible to feel for a person who talks too much, laughs too much, and by doing so seems to drown one's own personality—the sort of person who is called 'the life and soul of the party'. When tired after listening to such a person and laughing at his jokes for two or three hours, one can almost imagine that he is eating away one's life—sucking out one's life-blood like a vampire. The legend of the vampire (an evil spirit which lives by day in the body of someone who is dead and buried, and which walks through the world at night to draw life-blood from living people) is well known through Europe, and gives the poem its title and its subject:

Vampire

You hosts are almost glad he gate-crashed: see,
How his eyes brighten on the whisky, how his wit
Tumbles the company like a lightning stroke,—
You marvel where he gets his energy from . . .

But that same instant, here, far underground,
This fusty carcass stirs its shroud and swells.

'Stop, stop, oh for God's sake, stop!' you shriek
As your tears run down, but he goes on and on
Mercilessly till you think your ribs must crack . . .

While this carcass's eyes grimace, stitched
In the cramp of an ordeal, and a squeeze of blood
Crawls like scorpions into its hair.

You plead, limp, dangling in his mad voice, till
With a sudden blood-spitting cough, he chokes: he leaves

Trembling, soon after. You slump back down in a chair
Cold as a leaf, your heart scarcely moving . . .

Deep under the city's deepest stone
This grinning sack is bursting with your blood.

Vampire, perhaps rather difficult for a foreign reader because of its vocabulary, is made still more difficult by its strange uncertainty of mood. One does not quite know where the jokes end and the horrors begin; it is like a piece of music which seems to be in two keys at once.

As we saw when looking at the epic, there are some forms of poetry in which the writer chooses to follow certain fixed rules and conventions. Just as a composer may choose to make a piece of music in the form of a strict fugue or a strict sonata, a poet may choose to write in the form of an ode, a ballade (not the same as a ballad) or a sonnet. All these forms or shapes of poetry have existed in European literature for several centuries, and most poets have attempted them, if only to exercise their technical skill. It might be argued that a poem which is composed according to a set of rules can never be a truly lyrical poem: it cannot have the feeling of freshness and directness which some people think necessary in any lyric. This is an argument which we will not enter at present, because we have already agreed not to use the word 'lyric' in too narrow a sense. For our present purpose the only type of formal lyric we need consider is the sonnet—a form which has attracted all the great poets at some time or other, and which is still largely used by modern writers.

Most people know that a sonnet is a poem of fourteen lines arranged in a particular pattern. It was probably invented in Italy in the early Renaissance. It was made famous by Petrarch (1304-74) in the sonnets he wrote to Laura de Noves. These sonnets (if I may turn aside for a minute) started a fashion which was to influence poetry in Europe for several centuries: the so-called 'Petrarchan convention' of artificial love poetry. Petrarch did not have a love affair with Laura and it is not certain that he ever spoke to her. She was a respectable married lady who produced for her husband no fewer than eleven children. Nevertheless Petrarch set her up in his mind and in his poetry as the 'ideal woman', remaining devoted to her (in imagination) all his life. Dante had idealised Beatrice Portinari in the same distant way, although he loved and married Gemma Donati, by whom he had children. We do not know what Mr de Noves and Mrs Dante thought of these arrangements. The writing of poems to distantly idealised ladies remained a literary custom all over Europe for long afterwards.

The Petrarchan type of sonnet (also called the Italian sonnet) rhymes in this way: ABBA, ABBA, CDCDCD. The less difficult type of English, or Shakespearean, sonnet (like the one quoted on page 84) follows the pattern ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG. This is not necessarily because English sonnet-writers are lazier than Italian sonnet-writers, but because finding two sets of four rhymes and two sets of three rhymes is much harder in English than in Italian. In a strictly-composed sonnet of either type there is a clear break between the first eight lines (the octave) and the final six lines (the sestet). Except for Shakespeare, the two greatest sonnet-writers in English are Milton and Wordsworth, both of whom used the Italian form. Even Milton however did not always reach technical perfection. The famous sonnet on his blindness (surely one of the best sonnets in the world) has no clear break between the octave and the sestet.

The sonnet I am going to quote as an example of highly 'formal' lyric poetry is a well known one by Keats (1795-1821), *On first looking into Chapman's Homer*. Keats knew little Greek, but he had read Homer in the translation of George Chapman, a poet of Shakespeare's time. Chapman's *Iliad* (1611) must have made a great impression upon a young man whose mind was being opened for the first time to some of the greatest literature of the world. It should perhaps be explained that 'stout Cortez', referred to in the third line of the sestet, was the Spanish conqueror of Mexico in the sixteenth century. Keats mistakenly believed that it was Cortez who first saw the Pacific Ocean from a mountain in Panama (Darien). In fact it was Balboa, and Balboa was *not* silent as is suggested in the last line of the sonnet. On the contrary he exclaimed '*Hombre!*' ('Man!'). But these are matters of history, not of poetry, and it is with the poem itself that we are now concerned:

On first looking into Chapman's Homer

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;

Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

If we allow ourselves for a moment to look at this great poem simply as a piece of technique, it is clear that Keats has succeeded in overcoming all the difficulties of the Italian sonnet-form, and in creating a near-perfect example of it. The problem of finding three rhymes each for 'gold' and 'seen' without appearing to strain the sense has been completely solved. The break between octave and sestet is clear, yet not so sharp as to destroy the poem's unity; indeed, as is usual in good sonnets, the octave is a description of a situation, and the sestet gives the poet's thoughts or reflections on it. I am not of course suggesting that we ought to be thinking of all this when reading the poem for pleasure (any more than we ought to be thinking of the pianist's technical skill when enjoying a piano concerto); indeed it is the mark of a really great artist that his technique is hardly noticed unless someone draws our attention to it.

It would be easy for a bad poet writing a sonnet to allow the original lyrical feeling to be lost in the labour of composing it. Keats has overcome this danger with the ease of a great master, and the poem gives the impression of being natural and easy in spite of its strictly correct form. The comparison between the field of literature and the great unexplored lands of the New World is not a particularly original one (I used something like it in the first chapter of this book without, I think, having Keats in mind), but the way it is developed in the wonderfully effective picture of the 'watcher of the skies When a new planet swims into his ken' powerfully expresses the excitement of any new discovery. Such excitement is something which we all know, in however small a way, and that is why this particular sonnet has an almost universal appeal. By speaking of 'the realms of gold' in the first line Keats immediately fixes in our minds the comparison on which the poem depends: the quest for El Dorado, the land of gold, and the exploration of the 'golden' land of great literature.

It is not possible or necessary to mention many of the English poets who have chosen to write in sonnet-form. It is a form just as attractive to modern poets as it was to Milton and Wordsworth and Keats. One twentieth-century poet who is rather out of fashion at present is Rupert Brooke (1887-1915). After his sad death in the First World War Brooke became a popular romantic hero, and his poetry was consequently overvalued. There has been the usual critical reaction

and he is now (like his contemporary A. E. Housman, see page 102, greatly undervalued. I would suggest that any reader who is interested in English poetry should read Brooke's sonnets, which are excellent without being too difficult. W. H. Auden's sonnets (mostly written in the 1930s) are perhaps more difficult, but should certainly be attempted, especially *Surgical Ward* and *The Sphinx*.

The Shakespearian sonnet quoted below is by a younger modern poet, Charles Causley. Besides his other work Causley has written a number of sonnets. This one in particular seems to me interesting because it is about a problem which concerns all of us in the modern world: the problem of forgiving and forgetting the wars and hates of the past. I happened to read it in 1971 at a time when the Emperor of Japan was making a state visit to England: many English people of the older generation, remembering the terrible sufferings of Englishmen in Japanese prison camps, were angry that this former enemy should be so expensively welcomed. Causley's sonnet (written long before that visit) shows the ex-prisoner as a modern Christ who has suffered on the cross to remind us of our own responsibility and guilt.

For an Ex Far East Prisoner of War

I am that man with helmet made of thorn
Who wandered naked in the desert place,
Wept, with the sweating sky, that I was born
And wore disaster in my winter face.

I am that man who asked no hate, nor pity.
I am that man, five-wounded, on the tree.
I am that man, walking his native city,
Hears his dead comrade cry, *Remember me!*

I am that man whose brow with blood was wet,
Returned, as Lazarus, from the dead to live.
I am that man, long counselled to forget,
Facing a fearful victory, to forgive:

And seizing the two words, with the sharp sun
Beat them, like sword and ploughshare, into one.

Reading this fine poem one sees how difficult it is to draw a line

between the lyrical and the reflective. If the reader decides that it is not a lyrical poem at all, I shall not want to argue with him. What matters is that it is a beautifully constructed poem expressing something which all of us both feel *and* think.

The next kind of lyrical-reflective poetry I wish to discuss is the kind I have called (for want of a better word) 'musical'. All poetry, I suppose, ought to have some musical qualities, but there are some poems in which the sound is quite as important as the sense. Sometimes the sound is carefully planned to add to the sense through 'onomatopoeia', and it is then possible to understand something of what the poet is saying without knowing his language. You do not need to know German for example to get the sense of Uhland's *Der Schmied* (early nineteenth century):

Ich hör' meinen Schatz
Den Hammer er schwinget,
Das rauschet, das klinget,
Das dringt in die Weite
Wie Glockengeläute
Durch Gassen und Platz.

You do not need to know Latin or English to hear the horses galloping in Virgil's line,

Quadripedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum,

or in Browning's *How they brought the Good News*:

The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh,
'Neath our feet brake the brittle bright stubble like chaff.

These are examples of descriptive onomatopoeia, when the sound of things is imitated by the sound of words. This is not quite the same as using sounds to suggest thoughts and ideas. In this well-known little poem by John Masefield the beauty of the old ships is suggested by the smoothness and beauty of the sounds, while the ugliness of the 'tramp' ship is equalled by the roughness and ugliness of the sounds. The poem should of course be read aloud, and I hope the foreign reader will try it for himself:

Cargoes

Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir,
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine
With a cargo of ivory,
And apes and peacocks,
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine.

Stately Spanish galleon, coming from the Isthmus,
Dipping through the Tropics by the palm-green shores,
With a cargo of diamonds,
Emeralds, amethysts,
Topazes, and cinnamon, and gold moidores.

Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smoke stack,
Butting through the Channel in the mad March days,
With a cargo of Tyne coal,
Road-rail, pig-lead,
Firewood, iron ware, and cheap tin trays.

Cargoes is a simple poem: easy to understand and to appreciate as soon as one knows the few unusual words it contains. The poem I now wish to examine in some detail is much more difficult. It is however a masterpiece of the musical type of lyric, written about a hundred years ago by a man who might be described as the first modern poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. The amount of poetry Hopkins wrote is quite small, his whole work being easily contained in one thin book. This was because his poetic work was secondary to his work as a Jesuit priest, and as Professor of Greek at Dublin University. None of his poems was published during his lifetime, but his fame and influence have steadily increased since his death. There are very few English poets of the twentieth century who have not learned something from him.

Most of Hopkins's poetry is lyrical in the sense I am using the word in this chapter. It is indeed love poetry. It is not about the love between man and woman but the love between man and God, and especially man's love of God as he is seen in the beauty of the world. This is expressed in the best known of all his poems, *Pied Beauty* ('Glory be to God for dappled things'), a simple and beautiful piece which is loved even by people who find Hopkins's other work too difficult. The poem we are going to examine is a little more complicated. I shall try to explain it afterwards; but there is no need for the reader

to worry if he fails to understand it fully. The subject is a bird usually called a kestrel, but Hopkins uses the older name for it: windhover. Such birds are rare in England, but they can sometimes be seen in Scotland or on the moors and mountains of North Wales. Hopkins spent some time in the latter country, where he worked in a Catholic community at Holywell. From here he could walk over the lonely Denbighshire moors, and it was probably in the course of such a walk that he saw the kestrel floating above him in the windy sky.

The Windhover : To Christ Our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his
riding

Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,

As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and
gliding

Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

Many readers no doubt will complain that this poem is awkward and difficult—even more difficult perhaps than Donne's *Valediction*. Here however the difficulties arise not from strange ideas or metaphysical fancies but from the poet's determination to make music, even though it may cause difficulties for the reader who wants to get the sense. So far as sense goes, what Hopkins is saying is something like this: 'Watching the flight of a kestrel this morning I was moved by its ease, its elegance, and its beauty; indeed in this splendid sight the whole glory and beauty of nature seemed to be linked (or 'buckled') together. How much greater must your glory be, O Christ, my Lord and Leader; for, apart from such unusual beauty as that of the hovering

bird, even the common labours of man on the earth have their beauty: seen for example in the bright colour of a newly-turned furrow, or in the bright glow of cinders when a coal fire is poked, or falls apart.'

A number of words and phrases in the poem certainly seem odd, if one forgets that they are part of a pattern of sound. Compound adjectives like 'dapple-dawn-drawn' and 'rolling level underneath him steady' are undoubtedly strange in English; in using them Hopkins was using language in a revolutionary way, only acceptable if the reader is able to forget old habits of thought and language. It is strange too to split a word between two lines of verse as Hopkins does with 'kingdom' in his first sentence. It is odd to use 'achieve' as a noun, as he does in the eighth line; and to put in an 'Oh' for rhythmical purposes as he does in the ninth line. Certain words too are used in very unusual ways. 'Buckle' for example is hard to explain. My own reading of it as an intransitive verb (of which the nouns in the previous line form a subject) suggests that it means 'unite, join together', but I may easily be mistaken. The phrase 'O my chevalier' is equally difficult, though it is probably an address to Christ, as is suggested in the title of the poem. 'Sillion' (a furrow) is a 'dead' word which will certainly worry a reader who has not seen the poem before, unless he happens to know the French word *sillon*. Indeed any reader who comes to this sonnet without either a previous knowledge of Hopkins's poetry or a mind unusually fresh may well feel frightened by it; but the more he studies it, and the more he tries to hear it in his own mind the more he will come to see it as a masterpiece.

The best way of understanding and appreciating a poem like *The Windhover* is to follow the printed words while listening to a good reader reading them aloud. In this way one can both see and hear the unbelievably skilful play of sounds and rhythms. In the first two lines for example the strong vowel sound in 'caught' is echoed and repeated in 'morning', 'morning's', 'dauphin' and 'dawn-drawn falcon'. In the next two lines the lighter vowels of 'level' are echoed in 'steady', 'air', 'there' and 'rein'. The free use of alliteration in phrases like 'daylight's dauphin', 'morning's minion', 'skate's heel sweeps smooth' adds to the musical effect; so that the whole poem is both a technical masterpiece and a thing of beauty. And when one realises that it is written in the strict and difficult form of an Italian sonnet one admires Hopkins's skill more than ever.

There are some readers of course who do not like this kind of poetry at all; indeed Hopkins has never been a popular writer, in spite of his great influence on other poets. His search for beauty in pure sound leads him to twist the language into unnatural shapes, and sometimes

to say things which are not worth saying. Even in the first line of *The Windhover* he tells us that he 'caught' the bird, when he really means that he 'saw' it; and when he writes (in line eight) 'the achieve' as a noun (instead of 'the achievement') he is clearly paying a large price for the effect he wants. Objections of this kind (and there are many of them when one reads Hopkins) are not unimportant. In spite of them however (and partly perhaps because of them) he is one of the most original of all lyrical-reflective poets.

My purpose in describing four types of lyrical poetry—direct, metaphysical, formal and musical—was to give the reader some sort of direction in the wide field of the English lyric. Such divisions into types must never be taken too seriously however for there are very few poems which can certainly be said to belong wholly to any one of them. Even the simplest direct lyric for example must also have some formal quality, otherwise it could not be a poem at all.

In the rest of this chapter I shall please myself, and hope to please the reader, by quoting or describing some of my own favourite poems, whether lyrical or reflective or both. The field is so large that this method of selection seems the only possible one, even though it results in many important poets being omitted. One of the pleasures of poetry is remembering it when one is alone, perhaps (even at the risk of being thought mad!) reciting it aloud for one's own enjoyment. The great soldier of the Second World War, Lord Wavell, was not only a lover of poetry, but also the possessor of an exceptional memory. In 1944 he published a collection (*Other Men's Flowers*) of no fewer than three hundred poems, all of which he claimed to know by heart. Not many of us have memories of this quality, and so there is a particular attraction in poems which are very short. Here for example are two poems written by men looking forward to their own deaths: both are very short, but both are small masterpieces, well known to most English readers. The first is by Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864), best known for his *Imaginary Conversations*:

I strove with none, for none was worth my strife,
Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art:
I warmed both hands before the fire of life,
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

The second is by R. L. Stevenson (see page 147):

Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie:

Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

Reading these two poems one is chiefly impressed with their neatness and elegance. There is no waste of words—nothing unnecessary or merely decorative. The next two poems, Robert Herrick's *To the Virgins, to make much of Time* and George Herbert's *Virtue* are good examples of this kind of simplicity, typical of the best lyrical or reflective poetry.

Herrick (1591-1674) and Herbert (1593-1633) make an interesting comparison: almost the same age, both were educated at Cambridge, both became clergymen in the Church of England, both passed most of their lives in quiet country places, and both produced large quantities of poetry (Herrick's *Hesperides* contains no fewer than twelve hundred poems). When Herbert died in his parish of Bemerton near Salisbury, Herrick still had another forty years of life before him. Most of this was spent as curate of Dean Prior in Devonshire, though there was a period during the Commonwealth when (like many other clergymen) he was driven out of his church. The outward similarity between the two men's lives was not reflected in their personalities. Herrick, in spite of his profession, was one who enjoyed good food, cheerful company, pretty girls and all the amusement he could afford. It is true that some of his poetry is on religious subjects, but the best of it is about country pleasures: festivals, harvests, dances, weddings and parties. Christian though he was, his philosophy was in some respects pagan: 'eat, drink, be merry; for tomorrow we die.' This, or something like it, is the subject of *To the Virgins, to make much of Time*:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may
Old Time is still a-flying;
And that same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
The higher he's a-getting,
The sooner will his race be run,
And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry:
For having lost but once your prime,
Ye may for ever tarry.

George Herbert's character was more thoughtful, more spiritual; indeed with the exceptions of Milton and T. S. Eliot (whose poetry is of a very different kind) he is the greatest of English religious poets. The subject of *Virtue* is in one sense the same as the subject of *To the Virgins*, namely the shortness of human life; like Herrick, Herbert reminds us that the beauty of the world cannot last, that decay and death cannot be avoided. His reaction however is quite different; for whereas Herrick's only message is 'be happy while you can' (a very sensible message within limits), Herbert reminds us of the Christian message: death and decay mean nothing in comparison with the timeless life of a soul made strong by virtue and faith.

Virtue

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright!
The bridal of the earth and sky—
The dew shall weep thy fall tonight:
For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue angry and brave
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye,
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie,
My music shows ye have your closes,
And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like seasoned timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

As one might expect in a poet as thoughtful as Herbert, his work is much influenced by the metaphysical style. Like Donne and Cowley he is careful to avoid old and worn-out ways of saying things, and anxious to seem original. *Virtue* is much simpler and more direct than many of his poems, yet even here we have the strange and striking comparison of the 'sweet and virtuous soul' to 'seasoned timber' which 'never gives'—a comparison not taken from *The Classical Dictionary* but from the practical world of carpenters and builders.

To many lovers of English literature the century and a half between 1550 and 1700 appears as the great period of lyrical poetry. Not only was it the time of Shakespeare's songs and sonnets, but also of those many song writers (most of whose names are unknown) who wrote words for the madrigals and lute-songs of composers like Dowland and Ford and Wilbye. It was the time of great sonnet-writers like Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, Shakespeare himself, and Milton. It was the time of the great metaphysicals like Donne and Cowley; of the so-called 'cavalier poets' like Carew, Suckling and Lovelace; and of Andrew Marvell (1621-79) whose *To his Coy Mistress* is probably the best of all English love poems.

In comparison the eighteenth century seems unproductive; it has been called 'the age of reason', and perhaps reason is not the soil from which the best lyric poetry grows. It is a mistake however to think, as some of the romantics thought, that the century of Pope and Gray and Burns and Blake was 'unpoetic'. Gray's magnificent *Elegy*, written in the churchyard at Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire, is so well known that there is no need to say anything about it here. The best lyrics of Burns and Blake are equally well known. Pope however is often neglected: chiefly, I think, because he wrote very few poems which are short enough to be put into anthologies; but also because the leading romantic and Victorian critics failed to appreciate him. It was not until the twentieth century that fashion changed, and people began again to ask the question Samuel Johnson had asked: 'If Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found?'

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) was the son of a rich tradesman. All through his life he suffered from a physical deformity, but his weak and sickly body was perhaps an advantage in his career as a poet because it kept him at home with his parents at Binfield (near Windsor) for much of his life, thus giving opportunities for continuous study and writing. Before he was thirty he had become well known in literary society, and his translation of Homer's *Iliad*, completed in 1720, made him famous. In spite of one or two unfortunate love affairs, he never married. Among his friends he was a gentle and

kindly man, but he was easily hurt, and made a great many enemies whom he attacked cruelly in his satires (see page 158). His long poems *An Essay on Criticism* and *An Essay on Man* are famous but little read; but the best of all his work is probably *The Rape of the Lock*, which I referred to in a previous chapter (see page 27).

The only poems in which Pope attempted to express deep feeling were *Eloisa to Abelard* and the *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*. With the exception of Gray's *Elegy* this poem is perhaps the best lyrical-reflective poem of the eighteenth century. The 'unfortunate lady' was a young and aristocratic English woman whose family had cruelly disowned her because of an unhappy love affair, and who died, poor and alone, in France. Here are some of the concluding lines:

What can atone (O ever-injured shade!)
Thy fate unpitied, and thy rites unpaid?
No friend's complaint, no kind domestic tear
Pleased thy pale ghost, or graced thy mournful bier.
By foreign hands thy dying eyes were closed,
By foreign hands thy decent limbs composed,
By foreign hands thy humble grave adorn'd,
By strangers honour'd, and by strangers mourn'd!
What tho' no friends in sable weeds appear,
Grieve for an hour, perhaps, then mourn a year,
And bear about the mockery of woe
To midnight dances, and the public show?
What tho' no weeping Loves thy ashes grace,
Nor polish'd marble emulate thy face?
What tho' no sacred earth allow thee room,
Nor hallow'd dirge be mutter'd o'er thy tomb?
Yet shall thy grave with rising flow'rs be drest,
And the green turf lie lightly on thy breast:
There shall the morn her earliest tears bestow,
There the first roses of the year shall blow;
While angels with their silver wings o'ershade
The ground now sacred by thy reliques made.

So peaceful rests, without a stone, a name,
What once had beauty, titles, wealth, and fame.
How loved, how honour'd once, avails thee not,
To whom related, or by whom begot;
A heap of dust alone remains of thee,
'Tis all thou art, and all the proud shall be!

Almost all Pope's poetry is written in verse of this form—generally

known in English as 'heroic couplets'. It was not of course invented by Pope (indeed it had been used by Chaucer more than three centuries earlier), but it was Pope who brought it to perfection, and showed how, properly handled, it could be suited to almost any type of poetry. Here are two charming couplets from one of the *Pastorals* which Pope wrote at the age of sixteen or seventeen—lines which became widely known when Handel chose to set them to music:

Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade,
Trees where you sit shall crowd into a shade;
Where'er you tread, the blushing flow'rs shall rise,
And all things flourish, where you turn your eyes.

And here are a few lines from a later pastoral, *Windsor Forest*, in which Pope described the country around his first home, and the country sports of which he did not altogether approve. (The sportsman's 'tube' is of course his gun.)

He lifts the tube and levels with his eye;
Straight a short thunder breaks the frozen sky:
Oft, as in airy rings they skim the heath,
The clamorous lapwings feel the leaden death;
Oft, as the mounting larks their notes prepare,
They fall, and leave their little lives in air.

Some readers may complain that I have given too much space to Pope, who was after all chiefly a didactic and satirical poet rather than a lyrical one. My reason (apart from the freedom of personal choice for which I have already made my excuses) is that Pope, although one of the twelve or fifteen greatest of English poets, is often forgotten by the makers of anthologies. No such neglect is suffered by the great romantic poets, and I shall say little about them here. Wordsworth and Coleridge and Keats have already been mentioned in the chapter on narrative poetry, and I need do no more than advise the reader to study Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' and 'Tintern Abbey', and Keats's three odes: *To a Nightingale*, *On a Grecian Urn* and *To Autumn*. These five, well known and well loved by all English people with the smallest interest in poetry, must stand among the greatest reflective poems of the world.

I suppose most people would agree in naming Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.* as the most important reflective poem of the Victorian

age. A.H.H. was Tennyson's friend Arthur Henry Hallam, who had died in 1833 at the age of 22. *In Memoriam*, published in 1850, is not so much a single poem as a long series of poems, describing how the author's sadness and bitterness gradually soften through the years and under the influence of Christian thought. It is not an easy poem to read, and not suitable to be quoted here. Instead I shall quote a very short lyric in which Tennyson expresses the same feeling of grief for a lost friend, but in the simplest and most direct form. He composed it while walking by the sea at Clevedon in Somerset:

Break, break, break

Break, break, break,
On thy cold grey stones, O sea!
And I would that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me.

O well for the fisherman's boy
That he shouts with his sister at play!
O well for the sailor lad,
That he sings in his boat on the bay!

And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill:
But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still.

Break, break, break,
At the foot of thy crags, O sea!
But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me.

Such a poem is a good example of what a simple, direct lyric should be. It is interesting to compare it with Burns's *A Red Rose* (see page 80). Love and death have always been the chief subjects of lyrical poetry, and in these two poems they are treated with beautiful simplicity and great power.

I wish I had space to quote some of Browning's love lyrics—like *Meeting at Night*, *Any Wife to any Husband*, *Two on the Campagna*, and *Youth and Art*; but I must leave the reader to seek them out for himself. He may also like to seek out Browning's hate-poems: *The*

Laboratory, *The Confessional* and the *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* which begins powerfully enough with the line, 'Gr-r-r—there go, my heart's abhorrence', and ends equally powerfully with '*Ave virgo!* Gr-r-r—you swine!' Browning, as I have said (see page 44), is a poet who was much undervalued by the critics in the first half of the present century. Happily this is now changing; he has always been popular with ordinary readers of poetry, and it is good to hear the 'experts' beginning to praise him.

A.E. Housman (1859-1936) is still suffering from the unpopularity which comes to so many writers and artists in the thirty or forty years following their deaths. In the 1920s a little book of poems which Housman had published in 1896 under the title *A Shropshire Lad* was 'discovered' by the reading public and quite suddenly became famous. This did not please Housman, a lonely and rather quarrelsome man who had by then become Professor of Latin at Cambridge. He wanted to be remembered as the editor of the Latin poet Manilius, and was annoyed by the sudden fame and publicity which *A Shropshire Lad* brought him. That fame, as I said, has now grown less, and Housman is temporarily out of fashion; but there is no doubt of his greatness as a lyrical poet, and in a few years his work will again be widely read. Housman's best poems are all very short—almost epigrammatic. They have the same direct and simple quality we have seen in Burns and Herrick, but they are nearly always sad—even tragic—in tone, like this one:

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills?
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

As a boy and a young man Housman lived at Bromsgrove in Worcestershire: he was not therefore 'A Shropshire Lad' himself, but he loved the county of Shropshire and the Welsh borderland country in which he had spent many holidays, and whose 'blue remembered hills' he could see from his home. The next poem I am going to quote mentions two of those hills, Wenlock Edge and the Wrekin. On the low land between them are the remains of the Roman city of Uriconium.

On Wenlock Edge

On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble;
His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;
The gale, it plies the saplings double,
And thick on Severn snow the leaves.

'Twould blow like this through holt and hanger
When Uricon, the city, stood;
'Tis the old wind in the old anger,
But then it threshed another wood.

Then, 'twas before my time, the Roman
At yonder heaving hill would stare;
The blood that warms an English yeoman,
The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.

There, like the wind through woods in riot,
Through him the gale of life blew high,
The tree of man was never quiet:
Then 'twas the Roman; now 'tis I.

The gale, it plies the saplings double,
It blows so hard, 'twill soon be gone:
Today the Roman and his trouble
Are ashes under Uricon.

In any history of twentieth century poetry the names of W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) and T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) would take the most important places. Yeats is a poet who bridges the space between the Victorians and the 'moderns'. Some of his early lyrics (including the famous *Lake Isle of Innisfree*) were published in the 1890s, but his best work (including such poems as *A Prayer for My Daughter*, *The Wild Swans at Coole*, *The Tower*, and the 'Byzantium' poems) appeared much later. Of all English-language poets it seems to me that Yeats is the one who has written most thoughtfully about the problems and the sadness of old age.

Eliot was never a lyrical poet in the sense that Yeats was, but his *Four Quartets* (thought by most people to be his masterpiece) is one of the great religious poems of the English language. The foreign reader should be warned that Eliot (except for a few shorter poems like *The Journey of the Magi* and *A Song for Simeon*) is a very difficult poet. 'Poets in our civilisation as it exists at present', he wrote, 'must be difficult.

Our civilisation comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect.'

This belief that poetry *ought* to be difficult has influenced many writers of our time, with the result that even educated and intelligent English readers find themselves unable to enjoy modern and contemporary poetry as they would like. For foreign readers it is worse. I would remind them however that poetry can generally be enjoyed without a full understanding of it. The work of Dylan Thomas (1914-53) is a good example of this. Few of his poems could be 'translated' into English prose, yet their effect is strangely powerful. The reader who has read none of them should try *And Death shall have No Dominion*; or the beautiful *Do not go Gentle into that Good Night*, written on the death of the poet's father; or, best of all Dylan Thomas's poems, the description of childhood memories in *Fern Hill*.

I shall end this chapter with a poem by W. H. Auden (born in 1907), who is probably the most important English poet alive in 1972. As a young man in the 1930s, Auden became a Marxist. Much of his early poetry was about the political problems of the time: depression and unemployment in England and America, and the rise of the dictatorships in Europe. In 1939 he went to live in America, where he remained through the War and afterwards, having become an American citizen. In middle age Auden ceased to be a Marxist and turned to Christianity—a change which resulted in the *Horae Canonicae*, a series of reflective and religious poems. The poem quoted here is earlier, having been written in the 1930s. It expresses a feeling which most of us have at some time: the feeling that suffering, however terrible to the individual person, means nothing to the rest of the world. While the man in the upstairs flat is strangling his wife and putting his own head in the gas oven, you and I are dining happily in the restaurant downstairs. This thought, or something like it, came to Auden while he was looking at the pictures in the *Musée des Beaux Arts* in Brussels. He noticed how often, in old pictures of great events like the birth of Christ or the Crucifixion, ordinary everyday things are happening in the background: women cooking, children playing, businessmen doing business. In particular he noticed Brueghel's famous picture of the fall of Icarus. Icarus was the boy who tried to fly with wings made by his father Daedalus, but ended by falling into the sea. Brueghel's picture is really a beautiful landscape, with a man ploughing in the foreground, and a ship on the sea in the background. Far away in the distance, poor Icarus can just be seen falling to his death; but nobody cares.

Musée des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully
along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's
horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Note: The poem on page 77 was written about 1490 by John Skelton and is addressed *To Mistress Margaret Hussey*. Skelton was tutor to one of the children of Henry VIII. and afterwards curate of Diss, in Norfolk.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Novel

Ask a foolish question, according to the old saying, and you get a foolish answer. So we shall not begin by asking ourselves which country has produced the world's greatest novels. It would be foolish indeed to argue whether Tolstoy was greater than Dickens, or Proust better than Thomas Mann. Such international rivalry is best confined to the football field. Let us begin with a more intelligent and less inflammatory question: what is a novel?

Until the seventeenth century the word 'novel', if it was used at all, meant a short story of the kind written and collected by Boccaccio (1313-75) in his *Decameron*. By about 1700 it had got something like its present meaning, which, as *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* tells us, is 'a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length in which characters and actions representative of real life are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity'. In other words a novel, as we understand it today, is a story longer, more realistic and more complicated than the Italian *novella* as written by Boccaccio and other writers of his time. The novel is now the most widely read of all kinds of literature, and one is surprised to find (as its name suggests) that it is fairly new. Indeed it was not until the eighteenth century that people began to write and to read the sort of books that we now call novels. By about 1770 the reading of novels had become a fashion—almost a mania—with 'upper-class' women. Almost unlimited spare time had to be filled somehow: what pleasanter way than by reading endless stories about the loves and adventures of heroines who seemed, in imagination, to be so much like themselves? Richardson (see page 146) had shown that books—those dull-looking things covered in brown leather on the walls of father's or husband's library—need not always be full of history or philosophy or sermons. The novel had become what the cinema became in the 1920s and 1930s: a gateway into the world of pleasant dreams. As might have been expected, the supply of sentimental and romantic novels grew to meet the demand. A man called Mudie set up a chain of 'circulating libraries'. Even in quite small towns eager

novel-readers did not have to wait long before the very latest novel was in their hands. Anyone who has seen or read Sheridan's play *The Rivals* (1775) will remember that the heroine, Miss Lydia Languish, spent much of her time reading novels—a habit of which her aunt, Mrs Malaprop, strongly disapproved. So did Sir Anthony Absolute, who said, 'a circulating library in a town is an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge'.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were many people who felt, like Mrs Malaprop and Sir Anthony, that the novel was not altogether respectable. Literature—that is to say serious literature—ought to improve the mind. It was hard to see how novels could do this; indeed they might even have the opposite effect by encouraging young readers to live in a world of dreams. Most modern readers would find this a strange point of view, yet even now there are plenty of serious-minded people who think that it is a waste of time to read fiction. This opinion (though I certainly do not share it) is not quite as foolish as it may seem: before we go on to glance at the history of the novel and to consider the work of some modern novelists, it is worth thinking about the reasons for it.

The first of these reasons is as old as Plato (427-348 B.C.) who believed that almost all imaginative literature is harmful. In the dialogue called the *Republic* he argued that such literature leads people to believe in lies, shows both men and gods in a bad light, and is useless, if not dangerous, to the state. This opinion followed naturally from Plato's beliefs about the world in general (his metaphysics), which can be roughly described as follows: the world as we know it is nothing but a copy or imitation of the 'real' world; the real world consists of 'forms' or 'ideas'—the perfect 'idea' of a chair for example is the reality of which all existing chairs are imperfect copies; what we call art (sculpture, painting, poetry and so on) is a copy of the ordinary, everyday world, and therefore, according to Plato, merely a copy of a copy—an imitation of an imitation. This system (it seems rather less strange in Plato's own explanation than in this rough version) made poetry and fiction seem unimportant or useless. In an ideal state therefore the only imaginative literature permitted would be that which served some good political purpose, such as inspiring soldiers with courage, or honouring gods and great men. It is an unpleasant theory; but unfortunately Plato has been one of the greatest influences on Western thought; and many puritans, perhaps without realising it, have followed him in thinking that imaginative literature must be either worthless or dangerous.

Another reason why the novel was thought of for so long as being not quite respectable was simply its newness. This is one of the points

which Anthony Burgess makes in his book, *The Novel Now*:

...though novels have been in existence a long time now, there is, in comparison with the traditional forms of literature, still a sort of upstart quality about them. There are people who, despite the high example set by Cervantes and Flaubert and Henry James, insist on regarding the novelist as the lowest form of literary practitioner...he doesn't ennoble the world but presents it as it is, with all its meanness, dirt and sexuality...he identifies himself with the men and women of ordinary homes, streets, pubs, schools, prisons, using all kinds of language, flinching at no situation.

One might say, in other words, that the novel is related to the old traditional forms of literature (epic, lyric, tragedy) rather as a young working girl might be related to some old and aristocratic family into which she has married: she may be the most intelligent and attractive member of the family, but she has no history, no tradition; she is too 'young', too 'modern'. Added to this was the fact that (in England at least) some of the greatest novelists, like Richardson and Dickens, were men of poor education; that is to say they had not been to universities, and they had not been taught Greek or Latin. They were neither scholars nor 'gentlemen' (sometimes, indeed, they were merely women!) and this made it difficult for society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to treat them seriously. So there was a feeling, almost too nebulous to be expressed in words, that the novel was a second-class kind of literature.

Laughable as it is, the feeling still exists, and it is easy to see why. We must remember that in England alone something like two thousand works of fiction are published every year. Many of them are detective stories, sentimental love stories or tales of the Wild West. A growing number unfortunately are simply sadistic or pornographic. Very few are what a critic would call serious novels, and even fewer are 'good' novels. Authors and publishers, like the rest of us, have to earn money; and in the present 'permissive' atmosphere this can easily be done by producing books which are morally and culturally worthless. Let me make it clear that I am not complaining about all novels that deal with sex. Most of the world's great literature deals in one way or another with the love between man and woman. My complaint is against those writers and publishers who use our natural interest in sex as a means of selling bad novels. In doing so they lead some people into a childish and uncritical admiration of any novel described as daring or outspoken, and others into the belief that novels in general

are worthless. In London in 1960 it was decided, after a much-publicised law case, that D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was not obscene in the eyes of English law. The decision was reached after a number of 'experts' (who for some reason included a bishop and a headmistress) had told the court that this was not a work of pornography, but a good and serious novel with great literary value. The result was that millions of people ran to their bookshops to buy a sensational book, which otherwise they would never have thought of reading. Yet *Lady Chatterley* is probably the worst and silliest of Lawrence's books: it would have been better if the publicity could have been given to *Sons and Lovers*, which shows him at his best, and which is undoubtedly a great novel. I mention this piece of history as a reminder that novels should be judged by reading them, not by the amount of sensational publicity they get.

In a short introduction like this we need not look very deeply into the history of the novel. Nor indeed need we discuss the special features which mark it off from other kinds of literature. Some modern critics believe that the novelists of the past have paid too much attention to the story, or 'plot', and too little to ideology and psychology. Against this there has grown up (especially in France) something called 'the anti-novel'. The anti-novelists, in the words of Somerset Maugham,

...consider the telling of a story for its own sake as a debased form of fiction. That seems strange to me, since the desire to listen to stories appears to be as deeply rooted in the human animal as the sense of property. From the beginning of history men have gathered round the camp-fire, or in a group in the market place, to listen to the telling of a story. That the desire is as strong as ever is shown by the amazing popularity of detective stories in our own day.

For most people, in spite of the anti-novel, the telling of a story remains the important thing in a novel, just as it was in the *novella* of Boccaccio's time, the romances of the Middle Ages, and the prose fictions of classical times. Most modern novels however differ from these more-or-less-distant forbears in a number of ways. It will be convenient if we set them out in order:

1. The novelist, unlike the simple story-teller, is interested in character and motive as well as in mere events. Galsworthy's *Man of Property* (the first part of *The Forsyte Saga*) is a psychological study of its hero, Soames Forsyte. The Old Testament story of Naboth's Vineyard has the same theme (human greed for possessions) but deals only with events.

2. The novelist is often (though not always) interested in stating some moral or social problem, and expressing his own opinions about it. Hardy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* wished, among other things, to criticise marriage. Huxley in *Brave New World* and Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* wished to warn us against the dangers of the totalitarian state and the misuse of science.

3. The novelist is sometimes more interested in creating an atmosphere or expressing some kind of poetic feeling than in telling a story (Virginia Woolf for example).

4. The novelist is able, if he wishes, to take a much wider view of man and the world than the simple story-teller. The Russian novels *War and Peace* and *Doctor Zhivago* for example have hundreds of characters, and describe great historical events, as well as the behaviour of individual people.

From the point of view of the foreign reader who does not hope to become a specialist or an expert in English literature, the history of the English novel may be said to start in 1740 with the publication of Richardson's *Pamela*. We shall come to this a little later, but first (and without going into detail) we shall briefly look at a few earlier books which, although it might not be correct to call them novels, have much in common with the modern novel, and may be thought of as its forerunners.

The first of these is Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (about 1380). Although it has sometimes been called the first English novel such a description is misleading. *Troilus and Criseyde* is in fact a long story-poem of some 8,000 lines. Apart from its verse form however it has features which we think of as typical of the novel: lengthy conversational passages, a fairly complex plot, and, above all, psychological truth. Indeed the character of Troilus himself, the serious-minded young man destroyed by an unhappy and obsessive love, is as good as anything of its kind in English literature. Unfortunately Chaucer's language (especially in this long and powerful poem) is perhaps too difficult for most foreign readers; but if the language is outdated, the psychological insight is astonishingly modern. If Chaucer had not chosen to write in verse he might well be thought of (like Crabbe and Browning some four centuries later) as a great novelist rather than a great poet.

Another early book which in many ways resembles a novel is Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, finished about 1470 and printed by Caxton in 1485. Although Malory was a contemporary of Leonardo da Vinci, the *Morte d'Arthur* gives the impression of being an earlier, medieval work. It is in fact a great collection of stories connected with the half-legendary King Arthur and his knights—stories which have

for centuries fascinated the writers and artists of western Europe (including of course Wagner and Tennyson). Walter Allen in his book *The English Novel* says that the *Morte d'Arthur* is 'by no stretch of imagination a novel'; and it is true that the book does not have the unity or the fully-drawn characters or the clear sense of time and place that we find in the novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is besides, a collection of old stories rather than something created or invented by the author's imagination. Yet it has something of the broad vision of a novel like *War and Peace*, and it is bound together by two great themes which run all through it: the search of Percival and Galahad for the Holy Grail, and the unhappy love of Lancelot and Guinevere which in the end caused the break-up of the Round Table—'the goodliest fellowship of noble knights whereof this world holds record'. Whether or not we choose to call the *Morte d'Arthur* a novel, it is certainly one of the most important works of English prose, and it contains themes and material for a hundred novels.

By the time of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) two very different kinds of prose fiction were being written in England. Both kinds took their place in the later history of the novel, though the first of them never became very important. This was the 'romance'—a story like Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590) or John Lyly's *Euphues* (1578) or Robert Greene's *Menaphon* (1589). The romance was written in a highly artificial kind of prose, set against a classical or pastoral background, and peopled with heroes and heroines bearing Greek or Latin names. Their adventures were very far away from real life. Such books were intended for educated (and often aristocratic) readers who were capable of enjoying brilliant language and references to Greek and Latin literature and history. They did not ask for realism. It was not only the romances however which were to become parents or grandparents of the English novel, but also stories of a very different type which became popular at about the same time. These were written in ordinary language for ordinary readers, and had much in common with modern journalism. Thomas Deloney (about 1543-1600) wrote stories which had middle-class tradesmen, weavers and shoemakers, as their heroes. Thomas Dekker (1570-1632) was a dramatist who also wrote stories and descriptions of London life—including London crime and the suffering of London people during the plague of 1603. Both Deloney and Dekker had the novelist's interest in real people and events rather than the unreal world of the romances. Neither however produced any long work that might be called a novel. It was their contemporary, Thomas Nashe (1567-1601), who wrote what might fairly be called the first English novel—namely *The Unfortunate Traveller, or The Life of Jack Wilton*.

The Unfortunate Traveller is one of the best examples in English of what is called the 'picaresque' novel. The history of the picaresque story (many examples are too short to be called novels) extends from the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius (about A.D. 150) to Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1953). The word picaresque probably comes from the Spanish word *picaro*, meaning a thief or a rogue. It was applied to any long story in which a number of separate events, sometimes comic and sometimes violent, were joined together only by the fact that they happened to the chief character. In English the chief character in a book or play has traditionally been called the hero; but in a picaresque story the word is not altogether suitable because the hero is generally a rogue, a *picaro*. Lately the phrase 'anti-hero' has come into use. In Europe the best-known early picaresque tales are *Till Eulenspiegel* from Germany, *Lazarillo de Tormes* from Spain and *Gil Blas* from France. The most famous of all picaresque tales is Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605), but here it is not so much the Don himself who is the *picaro* but his servant, Sancho Panza. Among the great English novelists of the eighteenth century both Fielding (1707-54) and Smollett (1721-71) worked in the picaresque style. The central figures in Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Smollett's *Roderick Random* are picaresque anti-heroes like Nashe's Jack Wilton. If the picaresque novel is the novel in its oldest and simplest form, it is far from being dead or out of date. On the contrary it is as lively as ever: since Amis's *Lucky Jim* we have had a succession of novels (and of course films) which, with their anti-heroes and episodic plots, are true descendants of Jack Wilton and *Tom Jones*.

It is now time to take a short look at the different methods which novelists use. Unlike the dramatist, who must say all he wishes to say within the limits of a two-hour or a three-hour play, the novelist can allow himself almost unlimited time in which to build up his characters, set his scene and tell his story. If he wishes he can also include long explanations of his own philosophy and opinions, which are not always welcomed by the ordinary reader who wants to get on with the story. Consequently some novels are very long indeed, though most modern novels are shorter than those written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when people had far more time for reading. Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) has more than a million words: it is four times as long as *David Copperfield* and at least twice as long as *War and Peace*. Very long novels are generally out of fashion at present, but some writers (Anthony Powell, C. P. Snow and Evelyn Waugh are modern English examples) have produced series of separate novels in which the same characters appear, and which, if read in order, can be thought of as a single work of great length. Such a work (to which

the French phrase *roman fleuve* is sometimes applied) has many advantages both to author and reader (as well as to the publisher who by this means is able to sell half a dozen books instead of one). It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that long novels are not always good novels, and vice versa. Some of the greatest novels of the world (Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* for example or Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*) are in fact quite short, being less than one tenth of the length of *Clarissa*. Any novel however must be long enough for the author to build up character, background and atmosphere by whatever techniques or methods he chooses to employ. The most important of these techniques are perhaps narrative, conversation, letters and 'stream of consciousness' (which will be explained later).

Plain narrative, or story-telling, is of course the most usual method employed by the novelist; and in the most usual kind of narrative he will take what we may call an omniscient view. That is to say he will not only describe the outward behaviour and actions of his characters, but also their thoughts and feelings. Here for example is a short piece from Galsworthy's *In Chancery* (one of the novels which make up *The Forsyte Saga*). Soames Forsyte's wife, Irene, has left him. Soames, the 'man of property', refusing to accept the fact that she no longer loves him, has forcibly used his 'rights' as a husband by physically raping her. Irene has told the story in a letter to 'Old Jolyon' Forsyte, who, although Soames's uncle, is a good friend to her. Jolyon, walking in the city of Oxford, has been re-reading her letter:

He folded the letter back into his pocket and walked on, astonished at the violence of his feelings. What had the fellow (Soames) said or done?

He turned into High Street... and on among a maze of spires and domes and long college fronts and walls, bright, or dark-shadowed in the strong moonlight. In this very heart of England's gentility it was difficult to realise that a lonely woman could be importuned or hunted, but what else could her letter mean? Soames must have been pressing her to go back to him again, with public opinion and the Law on his side, too! 'Eighteen ninety-nine!' he thought, gazing at the broken glass shining on the top of a villa garden wall; 'but when it comes to property we're still a heathen people!... I daresay it will be best for her to go abroad.' Yet the thought displeased him. Why should Soames hunt her out of England?

And a page or two further on here is the unhappy Soames, thinking about his wife:

He moved slowly down the Row towards Knightsbridge, timing himself to get to Chelsea at nine-fifteen. What did she do with herself in that little hole? How mysterious women were! One lived alongside and knew nothing of them. What could she have seen in that fellow Bosinney to send her mad?

These two passages are interesting examples of the novelist taking an omniscient view—a novelist writing as though he knew everything. A simple man who knew nothing about novels might well say, 'This is ridiculous! How could the writer possibly know the thoughts of all these characters, and not only the thoughts but even, it seems, the exact words in which they spoke to themselves?' Yet we accept the convention, just as we accept the convention that a pair of lovers in opera will express their feelings in song, or that a group of German or Japanese soldiers in a British war film will talk to each other in 'foreign' English.

Although the convention of knowing everything, or omniscience as we may call it, is used in most novels, there is one type of novel in which it is impossible. I mean of course where the story is told in the first person, by a narrator who refers to himself as 'I'. Using this method a writer may make his story more realistic and more credible, but he will not be able to look very deeply into the minds and motives of the other characters. In *David Copperfield* for example Dickens can only show us the world through David's eyes. The other people in the story can only be observed from the outside. Steerforth is heartless and wicked, Emily is good and innocent: the reader has no means of discovering why they were as they were, or what made them behave as they did. And the writer can only make such comments as would be made by the 'I' of the story. In describing the Murdstones for example Dickens must show them to us as they appeared to the child David, and not as they were in fact, or as they might have appeared to a grown-up observer. It can be seen therefore that a novelist who tells his story through an 'I' must accept certain restrictions. By doing so, however, he can often make the narrative stronger and more life-like.

Sometimes a novelist will choose to tell his story through a series of letters. This method has some advantages, but it also has great disadvantages. For example it is very difficult to write in a number of different styles—one for each of the imaginary correspondents: in Richardson's *Pamela* the reader may find it hard to believe that the heroine, a simple domestic servant, would be able to write so eloquently and at such length. Perhaps Richardson saw the difficulty for in his second novel, where the letter method is also used, he chose as heroine

a girl of good family and good education. The letters in *Clarissa Harlowe* therefore seem less improbable than those in *Pamela*.

Almost all novelists of course use conversation to advance their story. There are many modern novels which have more conversation than narrative, though I do not know of any which consist of nothing but conversation. There is however an old Spanish novel (the story of Calisto and Melibea, probably written by Fernando de Rojas about 1490, and translated into English in 1631) where the story is told entirely in this way. Scholars are still wondering whether it ought to be called a novel or a play! From the reader's point of view there is no doubt that frequent passages of conversation are necessary if a book is to remain interesting. I suspect indeed that there are many people who like, as I do, to have a quick look at a new novel before deciding to read it. Page after page of solidly printed narrative, unbroken by any talk, may lead us to reject it in favour of something more conversational.

The writing of conversation raises another problem for the novelist: how is he to make sure that his characters speak the sort of language they would speak in real life? A doctor must be made to talk like a doctor, a farmer like a farmer, and a woman of fashion like a woman of fashion. So the novelist, like the dramatist, needs to have 'a good ear'. To catch and to imitate the speech habits and 'tone of voice' of people in conversation is a difficult task, though it may also be amusing and interesting. This is especially so in England, where we still have a great variety of regional accents and dialects. We also have a variety of 'class' speech-habits, but these are fortunately disappearing, thanks to more widespread education and the levelling effect of radio and television.

Forty years ago writers like Galsworthy, Wells and Maugham could assume that taxi-drivers and policemen would speak English that was comically incorrect, whereas lawyers and doctors would speak like 'gentlemen'—that is to say grammatically, but with what used to be called an Oxford accent. Today this is no longer true; but there is still plenty of variety in English speech, though we do not always find this variety reflected in the conversational parts of modern novels. Perhaps this is a pity, but we must remember that simple realism is not the novelist's only purpose. He may choose to make his characters talk in language which is intentionally unreal and artificial, just as Shakespeare made his characters talk in blank verse.

E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* quotes the following speech from a novel by Sir Walter Scott (*The Antiquary*): (The heroine, Isabella, walking with her father along the shore, is cut off by the tide. Having climbed as high as they can on some rocks, they still seem to be facing certain death by drowning.)

Yet even this fearful pause gave Isabella time to collect the powers of a mind naturally strong and courageous, and which rallied itself at this terrible juncture. 'Must we yield life', she said, 'without a struggle? Is there no path, however dreadful, by which we could remain till morning, or till help comes? They must be aware of our situation, and will raise the country to relieve us.'

It is impossible to believe that any young woman would talk like this while expecting to be drowned in the immediate future. Yet we accept the language, just as we accept the language of opera or the classical theatre, because we know (in spite of E. M. Forster) that artificial talk of this kind was a convention used by Scott and many other good novelists of his time. Scott knew as well as we do that this is not the sort of language people actually speak. Isabella's speech is not intended as a sort of tape-recording of what she actually said, but as a short and convenient way of telling us what she thought and how she behaved in a situation that lasted for several hours. This sort of conversation has been used by many novelists in preference to the realistic dialogue which some modern readers might wish for.

Besides the age-old methods of story-telling through letters and conversation and plain narrative, some modern novelists (James Joyce and Virginia Woolf are outstanding examples) use a method known as 'interior monologue' or 'stream of consciousness'. Writers who work in this way are following the principles of Freud and other psycho-analysts, believing that some of the most important activities of the human mind take place below the level of consciousness. They feel that the traditional method of telling a story in chronological order, and showing human characters as though they were reasoning, conscious beings and no more, gives a picture of life which is incomplete and superficial:

Look within, [writes Virginia Woolf in an essay on the modern novel] and life, it seems, is far from being like that. Examine for a moment an ordinary life on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms.

So the novelist invites us to enter the minds of his characters, to share their 'stream of consciousness', to feel the 'incessant shower of innumerable atoms'; almost indeed to *become* those characters.

One of the most important events in the history of the English novel

was the appearance of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922. Nothing like it had been written before, and almost every serious novelist since has been influenced by it. The book is about a single day in the lives of certain characters in Dublin. The central character, Leopold Bloom, is an anti-hero rather than a hero. He is however the Ulysses of the title; and Joyce carefully makes the ordinary events of his ordinary day correspond to the archetypal events in the journey of Homer's Ulysses in the *Odyssey*. *Ulysses* is an extremely difficult book, especially for a foreign reader, because Joyce uses innumerable different methods, expecting that the reader will understand thousands of literary references and many kinds of language. Indeed he is reported to have said that he wanted the reader to devote his whole life to studying the book! Above all he uses the stream of consciousness or interior monologue. Here is a passage in which Bloom is described looking out to sea from the hill of Howth near Dublin. In the distance he sees the well-known Kish lightship, which marks the approach to Dublin port, and he begins to think of the men aboard it. Then his thoughts run back to a day in the past when he and his wife took their little daughter, Milly, for an excursion on the steamer *Erin's King*. It had been a rough day, with most of the passengers seasick and frightened, but the child Milly, enjoyed every minute of it. Bloom goes on to reflect that children's fears are quite different from the fears of grown-ups.

Life those chaps out there must have, stuck in the same spot. Irish Lights Board. Penance for their sins. Coastguards too. Rocket and breeches buoy and lifeboat. Day we went out for the pleasure-cruise in the *Erin's King*, throwing them the sack of old papers. Bears in the zoo. Filthy trip. Drunkards out to shake up their livers. Puking overboard to feed the herrings. Nausea. And the women, fear of God in their faces. Milly, no sign of funk. Her blue scarf loose, laughing. Don't know what death is at that age. And then their stomachs clean. But being lost they fear. When we hid behind the tree at Crumlin. I didn't want to.

Mama! Mama! Babes in the wood. Frightening them with masks, too. Throwing them up in the air to catch them. I'll murder you. Is it only half fun?

Such writing is hard to follow, even for English readers. Certainly it has some advantages over simpler techniques like conversation or plain story-telling. On the other hand (and especially when used by writers less brilliant than Joyce) it can be wasteful and confusing. In most forms of art—painting, poetry, music, architecture—we admire

clearness and order and selectiveness. These are not usually to be found in novels using the technique of the interior monologue. But perhaps the novel is not an art-form at all; and even if it is, why should we judge it by the standards of other, quite different, art-forms?

Until now we have been thinking of the novel in a general way, with a glance at its history and at some of the problems which face all novelists. In the rest of the chapter I propose to offer short introductions to five important English novels which I have chosen for their readability. I call them important because they have given pleasure to many millions of readers, and will probably continue to do so as long as English remains a living language. People who are already familiar with English literature may complain that my choice is too obvious; but I think that two or three of them at least will not be familiar to readers of this book, even though they may be known from cinema or television versions. My five novels are *Mansfield Park* (Jane Austen), *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Thomas Hardy), *Brighton Rock* (Graham Greene) and *The Spire* (William Golding). Whether they are 'great' novels is a question which I shall not try to answer. Two of them are by living writers, so it is too soon to say whether they are great or not. Of the others, opinions may differ. For my own part there is only one (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*) which I would not hesitate to place among the world's greatest literature. Having said this however I must repeat my protest against the kind of critic or scholar who likes to place writers in some kind of order of merit, like candidates in an examination.

It will be seen that two of my novels were written by women; and no student of literature can fail to notice that this is a form of writing in which women seem to excel. In the fields of poetry, painting, architecture and musical composition one cannot help noticing (whatever the Women's Liberation Movement may say) that women in the past have not been notably successful. But a catalogue of women novelists (in England and America at least) would include some of the greatest novelists: Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, as well as modern writers like Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Iris Murdoch.

Although Jane Austen (1775-1817) lived into the nineteenth century (and all her novels were published after 1800), one seems naturally to think of her as an eighteenth-century writer. Her view of life is cool, unsentimental, ironical, amused. Living at the height of the English romantic revival she appears unmoved by it. If she responded it was only by making fun of it.

The daughter of a country clergyman in the south of England, Jane Austen had six brothers and an elder sister, Cassandra, to whom she

was very much attached. Neither of the sisters married, and after the death of their father they lived with their mother in the village of Chawton in Hampshire. The Austens, although some of their relatives were rich and even aristocratic, belonged to the middle class and were themselves far from rich. Jane never travelled more than a few miles from her home; and although she lived through the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars she never mentions these great events in her novels. 'Her experience of life', wrote Somerset Maugham, 'was confined to a small circle of provincial society, and that is what she was content to deal with.'

Living and writing at a time when novels were thought of as being less than respectable, Jane Austen always tried to keep her writing a secret from all but her family and close friends. It seems strange to us that she should have found this necessary; yet even fifty years later another great woman novelist, Mary Ann Evans, thought it best to hide her femininity by using the name George Eliot. When Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* was published in 1811 (she had written it about ten years earlier) it was described on the title page as 'by a Lady'. Her brother, Henry, writing after her death in 1817, said, 'No accumulation of fame would have induced her, had she lived, to affix her name to any production of her pen.'

Of the six novels Jane Austen wrote, *Pride and Prejudice* (refused by a publisher in 1797 and not finally published until 1813) is the most famous and probably the best. Most people in English-speaking countries have read it, or heard a radio version of it, or seen it in the cinema or on television. I shall say no more about it here, except to advise the foreign reader that he should start with it rather than with *Mansfield Park*, which I am going to describe in more detail. He must face the fact that many young people (and especially young men) find it difficult to enjoy Jane Austen at first approach. They complain that her novels are dull, having something like the character of those delicate, faded, water-colour pictures which sometimes hang on the walls of our great-aunts' sitting-rooms. They lack almost all the excitement which some readers demand: there is no violence, no sex, no romantic love, no philosophical discussion. Yet there are very few readers of Jane Austen who do not, after a time, become devoted to her. Getting to know her requires a little effort, but with this, and a lively sense of humour, one soon begins to understand why she is regarded as one of the greatest of all English novelists.

Mansfield Park, published in 1814, is written around the character of Fanny Price, a girl of poor but educated parentage, who is 'adopted' in childhood by her rich cousins, the Bertrams, and taken to live at their country house, Mansfield Park. The novel is written in the

third person, like all Jane Austen's novels, but it is through Fanny's eyes that we see the Bertram family, their friends the Crawfords, and Fanny's own family when she goes back to visit them. In so far as the book has a central story which holds it together, it is the story of Fanny's love for her cousin, Edmund Bertram, an over-serious young man who becomes a clergyman, and who is torn between his affection for Fanny and the attraction he feels towards the much livelier Mary Crawford.

The central happening in the book is the preparation for an amateur dramatic performance by the young people at Mansfield Park during the absence of the head of the household, Sir Thomas Bertram. A modern reader finds it extremely difficult to understand why this harmless activity should arouse the anger of Sir Thomas on his unexpected return; but we have to accept the fact that anything connected with the theatre was considered, in respectable country society, to be morally doubtful. And the play finally chosen, *Lovers' Vows*, appears to have been thought of as (what is now called) frank or outspoken, though it would seem perfectly harmless to us. In the end, after much persuasion, even the timid Fanny finds herself forced to act in the play, and a rehearsal is in full swing when Sir Thomas returns:

... the door of the room was thrown open, and Julia, appearing at it, with a face all aghast, exclaimed, 'My father is come! He is in the hall at this moment...' How is the consternation of the party to be described? To the greater number it was a moment of absolute horror. Sir Thomas in the house!... Julia's looks were an evidence of the fact that made it indisputable; and after the first starts and exclamations, not a word was spoken for half a minute: each with an altered countenance, was looking at some other, and almost each was feeling it a stroke the most unwelcome, most ill-timed, most appalling!

The reader might be excused for thinking that this is a description of some world-shaking event, not the mere interruption of an hour of harmless amusement.

A little later Fanny is invited to dine with Dr and Mrs Grant at the vicarage, and the question whether it would be correct for her to accept is debated with all the seriousness due to some great moral problem. Almost all the characters display a degree of snobbery which appears to us to be silly, if not evil; and it is possible to be as angered by the mouse-like humility of Fanny as by the arrogant stupidity of her aunt, Mrs Norris (Lady Bertram's sister), who misses

no opportunity of reminding the girl of her lowly and dependent position at Mansfield Park.

This however is Jane Austen's world: she shows us a small social group, at a particular time and place, and she gives us their conversation, their views and their characters with a cool clarity which is unlike anything else in the English novel. We must not necessarily assume that she approved of the society she describes; but even if she appears to do so, we must remember that a novelist does not need to be a social reformer. *Mansfield Park* is full of dryly humorous characterisation: perhaps the liveliest figure is the unpleasant Mrs Norris, and the most likeable is Fanny's brother William, who is in the Navy. There is a real undertone of social satire in *Mansfield Park*, but, unlike the writers I shall discuss in the chapter on satire, Jane Austen was concerned to show society as it was rather than to attack it.

As I have said, there are some readers who simply cannot enjoy Jane Austen. They find her dull and uninteresting, and they cannot understand why she is so much admired and loved by some. The best advice I can give to such readers is to leave her alone, hoping that they will come back to her with better understanding after a few years. Meanwhile they may take comfort from the words of another writer, who also found Jane Austen a little cold and uninteresting:

Anything like warmth or enthusiasm, anything energetic, poignant, heartfelt, is utterly out of place in commending these works (Jane Austen's novels); all such demonstrations the authoress would have met with a well-bred sneer, would have calmly scorned as *outré* or extravagant. She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well. There is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy, in the painting. She ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound. The passions are perfectly unknown to her: she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy sisterhood . . . What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study; but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death—this Miss Austen ignores.

The writer of these words, born during the last year of Jane Austen's life, was Charlotte Brontë (1816-55). It would be hard to imagine two novelists more different. If Charlotte Brontë could say that Jane Austen's work was without heart, Jane Austen might well have replied that Charlotte Brontë's had too much: too much feeling, too much sentiment, too much imagination, and not enough intellect or commonsense.

The lives of the Brontë sisters are probably better known than their books. Their father, the Reverend Patrick Brontë, was the son of an Irish peasant who spelt his name 'Prunty'. By good luck and his own efforts he managed to get some education, and to make his way to England, where he was admitted at St John's College, Cambridge. He became a clergyman, married a lady named Branwell, and finally settled down as priest in charge of a small village in Yorkshire called Haworth. Here, after only nine years of marriage, Mrs Brontë died and Patrick Brontë was left to bring up their six children. He persuaded his wife's sister, Elizabeth Branwell, to settle at Haworth and take charge of his household. The four elder daughters were sent for a time to a boarding-school, but conditions were so bad that two of the Brontë girls died, and Charlotte and Emily were removed. The memory of this school must have remained with Charlotte all her life; it is certainly reflected in the account of the typhus epidemic at Lowood Institution in *Jane Eyre*. Later Charlotte was sent to another and happier boarding-school, but when she was seventeen she returned home to teach her younger sisters. Their brother Branwell was a problem: after working as a railway clerk, a private tutor and a portrait-painter, he drank himself to death.

The surviving sisters, Charlotte, Emily and Anne, had been writing for their own amusement almost since childhood. Charlotte and Emily had seen something of life outside Haworth, not only in their boarding-school days, but during a year spent in Brussels. They had gone there when Charlotte was twenty-six to learn French as pupil-teachers in a girls' boarding-school. In 1846 they published jointly a book of poems under the names Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. This was so unsuccessful that only two copies were sold. Soon afterwards however each sister wrote a novel, Emily's being *Wuthering Heights* which is considered by most critics to be one of the greatest of all English novels. At the time however it was Charlotte's second novel, *Jane Eyre*, which was most successful. It had, as we shall see, all the ingredients of a best seller, and it made Charlotte comparatively famous.

Within a year of Branwell's death both Emily and Anne were dead also, but Charlotte lived long enough to enjoy some of the fruits of success, and to marry (at the age of thirty-eight) her father's curate. The marriage, though Charlotte's first feelings towards Mr Nicholls had been cool, began happily; but it ended tragically, for within nine months Charlotte died in childbirth. So the whole of a gifted and tragic generation passed away while still young, and the Reverend Patrick Brontë survived the last of his children by seven years. Visitors to the National Portrait Gallery may still see the portrait group which Branwell Brontë painted of his three sisters, Anne, Emily and Charlotte.

It is a poor piece of work in many ways, but the haunted and haunting faces which stare sadly out at us are a reminder that the life of the Brontë family had in itself all the makings of a tragic novel. A modern novelist, Margaret Lane, has written some of it in *The Brontë Story* (Heinemann, 1953)—a book which I recommend to anyone who wishes to know more about this strange family.

Some critics might wonder why I have chosen to introduce the reader to *Jane Eyre* rather than to Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, which is now generally thought to be a much greater work of literature. There are two reasons: the first is that I myself happen to like *Jane Eyre* very much indeed; and the second is that I have in mind younger readers who may be as unsophisticated as I am, and who find it easier to enjoy melodrama than tragedy; for the fact must be faced that *Jane Eyre* is sheer melodrama. If we look in it for serious studies of character, accurate reporting of social conditions, brilliant philosophical ideas, or an intelligently constructed story, we shall look in vain. What we shall find is a lot of typically romantic characters, a conventional picture of 'upper classes' and 'lower orders', a vague awareness of religion, a series of exciting but improbable events, and, in spite of all this, a truly great imaginative novel.

Jane Eyre, after a wretched childhood spent mainly in an orphanage, goes as governess to Mr Rochester's young ward at Thornfield. Thornfield is a distant and romantic mansion, and Jane soon learns that it holds some terrible secret. She is disturbed by devilish laughter, awakened in the night by a horrible apparition and frightened by a mysterious fire, from which she rescues Mr Rochester, with whom by now she has fallen in love. She is surprised and joyful when she finds that Rochester returns her love, preferring her to the rich and beautiful Miss Ingram. Just as they are about to be married the horrible truth is revealed: Rochester is in fact already married, and his wife is hopelessly and dangerously insane. For years she has been kept confined in an attic bedroom, attended by the sinister Grace Poole. The devilish laughter, the apparition and the fire are now all explained. Rochester, crazy with grief and passion, implores Jane to go on with the marriage; but she leaves him, and makes her way, broken-hearted and penniless, to a distant part of the country. Almost dead with hunger and fatigue, she is rescued by the Rivers sisters, and taken by them to live in the pleasant house which they share with their clergyman brother, St John.

St John Rivers is a fine, handsome man of high intelligence; but he is fanatically religious, and gradually persuades himself that he must marry Jane and take her with him when he goes as a missionary to India. Jane feels gratitude and friendship towards him, but she

can never forget Rochester, and never love St John. She is however just about to yield to his persuasion when she fancies she hears the agonised voice of Rochester calling for her. Since her arrival in the Rivers household Jane has luckily learned that her rich Uncle John has died in Madeira and left her the useful sum of twenty thousand pounds. She is therefore able to set out at once on the return journey to Thornfield Hall in search of Rochester, who as she knows by some sort of second sight) needs her help and her love. She finds the mansion of evil memories, but it is now a burnt-out and deserted ruin. She learns from local informants that the madwoman had escaped, set fire to the house, and herself perished in the ruins. Rochester himself has been blinded in an attempt to rescue her, and has now retired to a remote house, with only two faithful old servants to take care of him. Jane seeks him out, they are married, and all ends happily, even to the extent of Rochester's sight being restored!

It will be clear from the foregoing summary that *Jane Eyre* is in many ways a romantic thriller. It owes something to the so-called 'Terror School' of novelists of the late eighteenth century (Mrs Radcliffe, 'Monk' Lewis, etc.); and it is the ancestor of a thousand romantic novels and films, some of which, like Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, are familiar enough to the ordinary modern reader. Jane Austen, had she lived long enough to read it, would have thought *Jane Eyre* the product of a wild and overheated imagination. Its weaknesses are all too apparent—especially the absurd coincidences of the plot. (For example it turns out that the brother of the mad Mrs Rochester is a business friend of rich Uncle John in Madeira; and, even more strange, the Rivers family, into whose home Jane so fortunately wanders in her time of distress, turn out to be her own cousins: nephew and nieces of the same rich Uncle John!) It has been said too (as though this were an objection) that *Jane Eyre* is a wish-fulfilment fantasy calculated to appeal to young girls or to spinsters like its author. This seems to me to be quite true, but I cannot see what is wrong with that. Neither need we worry much about the oddities of the plot and the artificiality of the dialogue: like all good novelists, Charlotte Brontë creates a world of her own. It is a world of strong emotions, strange events and twisted characters; and yet at many points it is in close contact with the real world. *Jane Eyre* is not a novel to please rationalists, realists, puritans and anti-romantics. But such readers will do well to keep away from Charlotte, and indeed from the whole Brontë family.

In the year Charlotte Brontë died (1855) there was a boy of fourteen living in a quiet country town in Dorset; this boy, Thomas Hardy, was destined to live through the first quarter of our own century (he died in 1928) and to become the greatest English novelist of his time, and

indeed one of the greatest of all English novelists. Hardy's father was a stonemason, and this fact no doubt influenced his first choice of a career. After receiving a good education, partly at local schools and partly in the household of a local clergyman, he became an articled pupil with an architect, later becoming an assistant to the well-known architect, Sir A. Blomfield, and living in London where he attended evening classes at King's College. At this time he wrote a number of poems, and began writing essays and prose articles. He also became interested in two of the major problems of the time, one being the conflict between science and religion arising out of the ideas of Darwin and Huxley; and the other the social and political rights of women, and the injustices sometimes suffered by women under a man-made law.

By the time he was thirty he had made the hard decision to abandon architecture as a profession, and to devote himself entirely to literature. Hardy's life was uneventful. Having married in 1874 he lived with his wife near Dorchester in a house which he himself had designed. Here he spent the greater part of his life, first writing the novels which made him famous, and afterwards returning to poetry, which he had always considered the highest form of literature, though the least satisfactory as a livelihood. With his immense dramatic epic, *The Dynasts*, we are not at present concerned, though there are some critics who would rate it more highly than his novels.

Hardy was a 'regional' novelist; that is to say he wrote about a part of the country which he himself knew well, and which he used as a setting for almost all his stories. Dorset was his home county, and Dorset lies at the heart of that area of southern England which corresponds to the old English kingdom of Wessex. The Wessex landscape is almost as important in Hardy's novels as the human characters; and the Wessex towns, Dorchester, Winchester, Salisbury and Shaftesbury, form a constant background to the tragic figures he created. The names are changed to Casterbridge, Wintoncester, Melchester and Shaston 'for reasons', Hardy wrote, 'that seemed good at the time of writing'. What these reasons were we can only guess; what Hardy wished to do is however clear enough. He tried to express the atmosphere of the countryside of southern England as it was in the first half of the nineteenth century, and to recreate characters he had heard of or known in his youth, but who already belonged, when he wrote, to a past age. Indeed *Jude the Obscure*, his last novel, is the only one with a contemporary setting.

Hardy (though he sometimes resented the description) was a pessimist and a doubter in religious matters. Human life as he portrays it in the Wessex novels has its gaiety, its humour, its tenderness, its strength and even its nobility; but we look in vain for any sense of a

divine purpose. If anything, the world Hardy portrays is one controlled by a senseless and cruel fate. In his preface to *Tess* he quotes with approval the lines from *King Lear*:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport;

and the greatest of his novels, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, all show their chief characters as victims of this cruel and impersonal fate. It was not surprising therefore that his work aroused the anger of many conventional thinkers, or that Christians should condemn his attitude as irreligious.

The publication of *Jude the Obscure*, which by implication condemns both the social injustices of the time and the traditional idea of Christian marriage, angered many Christians, and Hardy had to face hostile criticism from many quarters, including the Bishops. One of them went so far as to demand that the book should be publicly burned (an odd contrast to our own times, when church leaders hasten to the defence of a novel like *Lady Chatterley's Lover*). How far Hardy was affected by the outcry against *Jude* is difficult to say: the fact is that he wrote no more novels, the years until his death in 1928 being devoted to *The Dynasts* and other poetry.

To glance at the entire work of a great novelist in one or two short paragraphs is almost inevitably to give a misleading picture of him. In Hardy's case this is particularly so because his work is not, like Jane Austen's for example, all of a similar kind. *Under the Greenwood Tree* is in many ways quite a different kind of book from *The Return of the Native*; *The Trumpet-Major* is properly described as a historical novel; *Jude* was in some respects a contemporary study in sociology. To most sympathetic readers (certainly to me) Hardy seems to achieve that mysterious quality which makes great literature. Many lesser writers during the early part of this century tried to follow him, but none has really succeeded. Even Hardy himself is not always successful, but who is? There are many minor writers who come near perfection in their own small way, but greater men often miss it. Homer sometimes fails, as does Shakespeare: the higher your purpose the greater the risk of failure. Walter Allen's judgement of Hardy in *The English Novel* is, I think, an entirely fair one:

His faults are glaring enough. His plots creak. His villains have stepped off the boards of a barn-storming company peddling

melodrama. His prose is often clumsy to the point of uncouthness. Yet the true index of Hardy's stature is that he is almost the only tragic novelist in our literature and that when we consider him we have ultimately to do so in relation to Shakespeare and Webster and to the Greek dramatists.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles, published in 1891, is considered by many to be the greatest of all Hardy's novels. It is a story of sexual seduction (though anyone who goes to it in the hope of finding pornography is going to be sadly disappointed), and Hardy was certainly being provocative when he added the sub-title 'A Pure Woman'. 'It was appended', he wrote in his preface to the edition of 1912, 'at the last moment, after reading the proofs, as being the estimate left in a candid mind of the heroine's character.' Tess's parents, John and Joan Durbeyfield, are a poor and ignorant couple. Durbeyfield is a farm worker, yet aware that he is a direct descendant of the formerly powerful d'Urberville family. Tess leaves home and goes to work for a remote relation, Mrs d'Urberville, who is quite unaware of the family connection. She is seduced by Mrs d'Urberville's son Alec, whom she hates and despises. To escape his attentions she returns home, and gives birth to a child. Her easy-going parents accept the situation with little complaint, and the baby is adored by Tess's little brothers and sisters. Soon however the child falls ill. Tess wishes to have it baptised, but when the vicar calls at the cottage her father, in a moment of drunken obstinacy, refuses to admit him. So Tess decides that she herself will baptise the baby in the presence of her little brothers and sisters, who all share the same room in the Durbeyfield cottage. The scene, I think, is one of the most touching in all literature:

Her figure looked singularly tall and imposing as she stood in her long white nightgown, a thick cable of twisted dark hair hanging straight down her back to her waist. The kindly dimness of the weak candle abstracted from her form and features the little blemishes which sunlight might have revealed . . . her high enthusiasm having a transfiguring effect upon the face which had been her undoing, showing it as a thing of immaculate beauty, with a touch of dignity which was almost regal. The little ones kneeling round, their sleepy eyes blinking and red, awaited her preparations full of a suspended wonder which their physical heaviness at that hour would not allow to become active.

The most impressed of them said:

'Be you really going to christen him, Tess?'

The girl-mother replied in a grave affirmative.

‘What’s his name going to be?’

She had not thought of that, but a name suggested by a phrase in the book of Genesis came into her head as she proceeded with the baptismal service, and now she pronounced it:

‘SORROW, I baptise thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.’

She sprinkled the water, and there was silence.

‘Say “Amen”, children.’

The tiny voices piped in obedient response ‘Amen’.

After the baby’s death Tess, hoping to escape from the memory of her troubles, goes to work at a farm called Talbothays in a distant part of Wessex. Here she meets a young man called Angel Clare, with whom she falls in love. Clare is the son of an evangelical clergyman, and, by the conventions of the time (the third or fourth decade of the nineteenth century), much above her in social position. He has not followed his father and two elder brothers into the Ministry because he cannot accept orthodox Christian beliefs; nevertheless his ideas on morality are highly conventional. He is working as a pupil on the Talbothays farm, and intends eventually to buy a farm of his own, possibly abroad.

Tess begins by keeping Angel at a distance, though she knows that he returns her love, and in spite of her admiration and respect for him. When he proposes marriage she at first refuses, feeling that her past misadventure, though no fault of her own, makes her unworthy of him. Angel’s persuasion and her great love for him eventually break her resistance, and she agrees to marry him. Before the wedding she tries on several occasions to tell him of her past ‘sin’, but each time she is prevented, either by some trivial circumstance, or by a failure of courage. Some time before the wedding Tess writes a confession and explanation, seals it in an envelope, and pushes it under the door of Angel’s room. When they meet next day his attitude is unchanged, and Tess concludes that he has read the letter, still loves her, and intends never to mention the matter she has revealed to him. In fact (and this is a typical example of the kind of coincidence which Hardy’s critics have condemned as being too improbable) Angel has never received the letter, which had lodged under the carpet of his room.

Tess discovers this only an hour or two before the wedding, and is too overwhelmed with grief and anxiety to mention it until they have started their honeymoon, which is spent in an ancient mill-house. Here, the evening of the wedding-day, Tess at last summons up enough courage to break the secret to her husband. She tells him the story

as they are sitting together in the ancient parlour of the mill-house, illuminated only by the flames of a wood fire (for the wedding was at Christmas). Angel is at first incredulous, then profoundly shocked that the apparently pure girl he has married is not in fact a virgin. Tess is also shocked, but for a different reason. She simply cannot believe that Angel Clare's love for her, and her own devotion to him, could be marred or destroyed by a past event in which she had been no more than an innocent victim. The first few nights of their married life are spent in separate rooms, and Angel then announces that they must part, at least for a time, so that he can think things over. He plans to go to Brazil for a year or two with the idea of studying farm conditions there. Tess is to stay at home, either in lodgings or back in her parents' cottage. Her material needs are to be met by money which her husband leaves her, or, in any emergency, by help from his father, the vicar.

Deserted by the husband whom she still loves with her whole heart, and too proud to apply for help either to his parents or her own, Tess returns to work on the land. Many months pass, and Clare does not write. Tess's own imploring letters are ignored, and gradually she becomes convinced that she will never see her husband again. At this point (and here again it might be said that Hardy stretches coincidence too far) she once again meets her seducer, Alec d'Urberville. Somewhat surprisingly he has been converted and has become an itinerant preacher, but seeing Tess again revives his passion for her. A mixture of passion and genuine regret for the suffering he has caused her in the past prompts him to pursue her relentlessly, and at last wearied by his importunity, moved by consideration for her now widowed mother and her young brothers and sisters to whom d'Urberville offers a home and security, Tess gives way, convinced by now that her husband will never return. In fact however Angel Clare is already on his way back from Brazil, broken in health and spirit by the tough conditions he has encountered there, and now convinced that he loves the wife he has treated so harshly.

On arriving in Wessex Clare finds it impossible at first to find out what has happened to his wife. At last his enquiries lead him to Sandbourne (Hardy's name for Bournemouth) where he finally traces Tess to a hotel where she is staying with d'Urberville. They face each other in the hotel dining-room, and each is horrified: Clare because it seems that his own foolish behaviour has driven his wife permanently into the arms of another man; Tess because the husband she has loved and waited for and finally given up for dead has returned, worn out, ill and needing her help. She realises that she loves him more than life, and hates the man, still asleep upstairs, who has (as

it seems to her) tricked her into betraying her husband. The moment Angel Clare has left her (never, as he thinks, to see her again) Tess seizes a carving knife from the waiting breakfast tray, kills the still-sleeping d'Urberville, and runs desperately away from the hotel and after her husband.

At last they are reunited and reconciled; but each knows that it can only be a matter of hours before Alec's body is discovered and only a day or two before Tess is hunted down and arrested. They make for the country of North Wessex, and hide for six days and six nights in a deserted mansion where they are discovered, asleep in each other's arms, by the old caretaker. Before she can rouse the neighbours, the fugitive pair leave the house and continue their flight across country. They reach Stonehenge, and here Tess is too exhausted to continue. As the sun rises over the Great Plain and gilds the grim monoliths in whose shelter the innocent murderess lies asleep, the police at last arrive.

The last scene, frequently quoted, shows us Angel Clare and Tess's young sister, 'Liza-Lu, looking down in the chill of early morning on the city of Wintoncester from a hill just outside its boundaries. Their gaze is concentrated on the prison:

Upon the cornice of the tower a tall staff was fixed. Their eyes were riveted on it. A few minutes after the hour had struck something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag.

'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess.

The tragic note on which *Tess* ends has already been sounded, almost at the beginning of the story, in a conversation between Tess and her little brother Abraham as they jog along under the stars in the cart with which Tess has undertaken a journey to market on behalf of her lazy and irresponsible father. Sitting beside his sister, the child has been looking up into the clear sky.

'Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?' [said Abraham]

'Yes.'

'All like ours?'

'I don't know, but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubborn-tree. Most of them splendid and sound—a few blighted.'

'Which do we live on?—a splendid one or a blighted one?'

'A blighted one.'

That Hardy should be called a pessimist is not surprising to anyone who reads this magnificently tragic novel. But a tragic attitude is not necessarily a gloomy one, and there is much in *Tess* that is far from gloomy, especially the essential beauty and goodness of Tess's own character. Angel Clare is a typically tragic character in the Aristotelian sense: likeable, honest, affectionate and intelligent; yet showing a curious moral blindness which is the real cause of Tess's suffering and his own. If he had been able to rid himself of the ingrown and distorted notions of purity which he had been brought up with there would have been no suffering: but he had cast away Christian belief while unconsciously retaining mistaken ideas of Christian morality.

Although Hardy did not die until 1928 most people would say that he belongs, as a novelist, to the nineteenth century. Until now I have said almost nothing about the novel in the twentieth century. We shall go on therefore to look at the novel in modern times, including the work of writers who are still alive. First however a reminder that in literature (as in the other arts, as in human relationships, as in religion) the idea of progress is not relevant. A novel written last year will not necessarily be better or worse or even more relevant than a novel written two hundred years ago. We are so used to the idea of progress in science and technology that we easily (and foolishly) imagine that it also applies in the arts. This year's television or motor-car or electric cooker is so clearly better than its equivalent ten years ago that we begin to believe that this year's painting or play or novel must also be better. Modern novels are no better and no worse than novels written in the past: all one can say is that they are more numerous and more varied. The variety is such that anything like a survey would be far beyond the scope of this book: all I can do, before looking in some detail at novels by Graham Greene and William Golding, is to suggest a few trends that seem to me apparent in twentieth-century novels, and to mention a few writers as examples of each.

Because war and violence have been so tragically important in the history of our century, I shall begin with what we may loosely call 'war novels'. The most powerful novels of the First World War probably came from Germany (Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*) and France (Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*). If asked to name two equally powerful novels about the Second World War I should personally choose Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* and Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, both of which are American. In England Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, published in the 1920s, was a better exposure of the horror of war (not so much the purely physical horror of the battlefield and the trenches as the moral horrors); the cult of military 'glory' by old men safely at home; the

shameless lies of politicians and propagandists; the terrible victimisation of the young.

Perhaps the most important English novelist of the Second World War was Evelyn Waugh (1903-66). It would be wrong to think of him only as a war writer, because the books which made him famous (*Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, *A Handful of Dust*) were written in the late 1920s and 1930s and his later and better works (especially *Brideshead Revisited*) are not war novels. *The Sword of Honour* however is certainly one of the most important books to come out of the Second World War. It is in fact a set of three novels (a trilogy), but Waugh decided later to republish it as a single work. The central figure is Guy Crouchback, a Catholic (like Waugh himself) and a gentleman in the old sense of the word—that is, a man who has inherited enough money to live without working. Crouchback, separated from his wife, but unable to divorce her because of his religious beliefs, joins the army and serves in Crete and Yugoslavia. Fighting side by side with men of every type and social class he begins to realise that the world of the gentleman is finished, and not to be greatly regretted. He even learns to respect the ungentlemanly Trimmer, a fellow officer who seduces Crouchback's estranged wife. In the end Trimmer proves no less efficient and heroic than the gentlemen officers. After Trimmer's death Crouchback and his wife are reunited, and Crouchback accepts the child (really Trimmer's) as his own.

The Sword of Honour has been well described by Anthony Burgess as 'not merely the story of one man's war; it is the whole history of the European struggle itself, told with verve, humour, pathos, and sharp accuracy.' It would be a mistake, as I have said, to think of Evelyn Waugh as only, or even primarily, a war writer. His early novels were comic and satirical, full of the high spirits of the 1920s and 1930s. Some critics thought he was too clever and too frivolous, blaming him because he seemed unaware of the real state of Britain in those days of depression and unemployment. Yet his work, taken as a whole, reflects most of the social changes that took place between 1920 and 1960; and if his social and political attitudes strike the modern reader as excessively right wing, it must be remembered that one can enjoy and appreciate a novelist's work without sharing his opinions. Waugh's later novels, especially *Brideshead Revisited*, and *The Sword of Honour* trilogy are certainly among the most important of our century.

Another modern trend has been towards what the French call the *roman fleuve*: the 'river novel' which flows on and on through a number of books, tracing the history of a single character or group of characters. Usually (and often happily) each part can be enjoyed as a separate book. The most famous of such novels is perhaps *The Forsyte Saga*

and its continuation, *A Modern Comedy*. This is a story which has become well known through the world (perhaps better known than it deserves) because of the brilliant television adaptation produced in the 1960s. Its author, John Galsworthy (1867-1933), belonged like Evelyn Waugh to the comfortable *bourgeois* class. Unlike Waugh however he felt that there was something basically wrong with a society which allowed such inequalities, and attached so much importance to property. So, as the story moves on through four or five generations of the Forsyte family, the 'man of property', in the person of Soames Forsyte, gives place to his son-in-law, Michael Mont—a man well aware of the injustice of English society in the 1920s, and trying, as a Member of Parliament, to improve it.

Galsworthy has been more popular abroad than in England, and it is important that the foreign reader should understand this. To accept the England of *The Forsyte Saga* as a true picture of England now would be as foolish as to accept Dickens's *Oliver Twist* as a picture of modern English education. As Galsworthy is one of the first English novelists likely to be read by foreign students, it might be helpful to explain that *The Forsyte Saga* consists of three novels: *The Man of Property* (1906), *In Chancery* (1920) and *To Let* (1921). These tell the history of the Forsyte family before the First World War. *A Modern Comedy* consists of *The White Monkey* (1924), *The Silver Spoon* (1926) and *Swan Song* (1928). These continue the story through the post-war period of depression and revolutionary change.

Another and more recent river novel is *Strangers and Brothers* by C.P. Snow (born 1905, now Lord Snow). This consists of eleven novels, covering the life of the central character, Lewis Eliot, from 1925 to the 1960s. The novels need not of course necessarily be read in the right order. Indeed most readers would probably find it best to start with *The New Men*, which deals with the period 1939-46, and *The Corridors of Power*, which deals with the 1950s. In contrast to the *bourgeois* characters of Galsworthy and the gentlemen of Evelyn Waugh, Snow's hero belongs to the class of scientists and technicians—the 'new men' of his title. Lewis Eliot begins life as a working-class boy from mid-land England, and rises by his own intellectual ability (added to a certain amount of good luck and intrigue) to a position of power in government service. Comparing Waugh's men with Snow's men, it is interesting to ask oneself which is less unpleasant: to be ruled by 'gentlemen' or by 'new men'.

Anthony Powell (also born in 1905) is another writer who has worked (and is still working) on a sequence of several novels. Powell's roman fleuve is called *The Music of Time*, and is clearly influenced by Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, though it has little of the humanity

and universality of the great French novel. For a reader unfamiliar with Powell I would recommend *From a View to a Death*, which stands outside *The Music of Time* sequence and seems, to me at least, a truly tragic novel.

The historical novel has been popular in England since the time of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832). During the twentieth century it has attracted more writers and more readers than ever before. I suppose this is partly because it has offered an escape from the many troubles of the times, and partly because better education has made us all more interested in the past. Historical novels range from those like Kathleen Winsor's (an American, born 1919) *Forever Amber* (which is an imaginary story about seventeenth-century people who are given the names of real characters and little more) to careful reconstructions of people and events, based on serious research. Some of the best historical novelists, like Mary Renault (born 1905) and Alfred Duggan (born 1903), purposely choose to write about times of which little is known: the former has generally chosen Mediterranean pre-history and the latter British history of the so-called Dark Ages. The advantage of such a choice is that the author is free to use his imagination without being restricted by historical facts. From the reader's point of view of course it is useful to know how much of a novel is true history, and how much pure invention: the value and enjoyability of a historical novel does not depend on its factual truth, but no reader likes to feel that he is being deceived by fiction which pretends to be fact.

Robert Graves (born 1895) is as much a historian as a novelist, and anyone who reads his Roman novels (*I, Claudius*, *Claudius the God*, *Count Belisarius*) may be sure that he is reading about people who actually lived and events that actually happened. Besides being a scholar, a historian and a writer of clear and strong English prose, Graves has the ability to get inside the minds of his central characters. Not only does one feel that Graves is Claudius, but in *Wife to Mr Milton* one feels that Graves is Mary Powell, the young and high-spirited royalist girl who found herself, during the English Civil War, married to young John Milton—poet, puritan and scholar, but also an obstinate and conceited prig! *King Jesus*, published in 1946, is a highly original attempt to show Jesus as a king in the literal, worldly sense—an illegitimate son of King Herod. Many Christians have found it offensive; yet it is a brilliant and fascinating novel.

Henry Treece (1911-66) wrote a number of historical novels, serious, thoroughly researched and dealing with several different periods. Less scholarly and more popular, yet highly readable, are the many novels of Georgette Heyer dealing with the Georgian period of English history. Many writers who would certainly not be called historical

novelists have yet written single books of this sort; notable examples being Evelyn Waugh's *Helena* (about the mother of the Emperor Constantine and her discovery of the cross on which Christ had been crucified) and William Golding's *The Spire*, which we shall look at more closely later.

A fourth type of novel which has attracted English writers in modern times may be described as 'visionary', 'apocalyptic', 'allegorical' or (if one does not like it) 'fanciful'. Such books are not intended to reflect life as it actually is, but as it might be. They range from science fiction, which has now become an enormous literary field in its own right, to moral fables like Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. The English may be (as Napoleon said) a nation of shopkeepers, but when the shops are closed they sometimes become dreamers. It is interesting to remember that the word 'utopia', which in modern English means an ideal country where all is perfect, was first used by Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) as the title of his book in which such a country is described. In the same tradition are the two utopian romances of William Morris (1834-96), *News from Nowhere* and *The Dream of John Ball*.

H. G. Wells (1866-1946) is one of the outstanding figures in modern English literature, not only because of his realistic novels like *Mr Polly* and *Kipps* (both very much in the tradition of Dickens), but also because he was the first great writer of science fiction. Stories like *The Time Machine*, *The Invisible Man* and *The First Men on the Moon* are little more than amusing fancies; but in *The Sleeper Awakes* and *A Modern Utopia* Wells took a serious look into the future. It is interesting to notice how much of what he foresaw has now actually happened. At the same time it is depressing to compare Wells's visions of the future with those of later and less optimistic writers. Wells, it must be remembered, wrote the books I have mentioned before 1914. There had been no Great War, and it was still possible to believe in progress and the perfectibility of mankind.

When Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) wrote *Brave New World* things had changed: 1932 was not a year when one could feel very hopeful about the future, and *Brave New World* was a frightening expression of the fears felt by many thoughtful people—fears of a future in which the only values would be material values, and human beings would be manipulated by scientists and 'planners'. Many of these fears have already become realities. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is an even more frightening vision of the future: a world divided into three great power-blocks, Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia. The first of these (in which Britain has become simply Airstrip One) is controlled by Big Brother; its citizens are watched by the Thought Police and

'brainwashed' by a language called Newspeak and an educational system based on Doublethink.

In *Facial Justice* (1960), L.P. Hartley gives us yet another terrible picture of a future England: civilisation has been destroyed in a nuclear war, and the new 'civilisation' is even more terrible than the war itself. It should be explained that neither L. P. Hartley nor Aldous Huxley is a writer who specialises in visionary writing. Both are novelists who have written famous novels of a more realistic kind. Huxley's *Point Counter Point* for example is an important satirical novel which should be read by anyone who wishes to understand the Britain of the 1920s; Hartley's *The Go-Between* (recently filmed) is a moving and rather beautiful story about a young boy innocently caught up in the sexual intrigues of older people.

The writers I have mentioned are only a very few of the important English novelists who have written, or are still writing, in the twentieth century. Some (D. H. Lawrence, Somerset Maugham, H. E. Bates) are mentioned in the chapter on the short story. Others, like Lawrence Durrell, Christopher Isherwood, Nancy Mitford, Iris Murdoch and Angus Wilson, I have unwillingly omitted. I have also had to omit great American novelists like William Faulkner and John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway. If he does not know them already, the reader will gradually find them out for himself as his English studies progress. If the present chapter is not to become unbearably long we must now go on to look at the two modern novels I have chosen for more detailed treatment: *Brighton Rock* by Graham Greene, and *The Spire* by William Golding.

Born in 1904, Graham Greene is the son of a former headmaster of a public school (Berkhamsted). At this school he was educated until he went up to Oxford, and it is perhaps not surprising that he found school life difficult. In an essay called *The Revolver in the Cupboard* and in his recent autobiography, *A Sort of Life*, he describes the depressing effect which school life had on him in late adolescence, and how his parents sent him to a psycho-analyst. Release from the 'prison' of school brought no release from the boredom which troubled him at this time; and even at Oxford (as can be seen in a collection of poems called *Babbling April* published in 1925) he seems to have been very much aware of the uselessness and the evil of life. In 1926 (at this time he was working as a sub-editor on *The Times*) Graham Greene was converted to Roman Catholicism, and this fact has clearly had a deep influence on his thought and his writing. The existence of evil in the world is a fact coolly recognised in Catholic philosophy—recognised and faced, and therefore less terrifying than it is to the ordinary agnostic.

Journeys to Liberia (1935) and Mexico (1938) provided Graham Greene with material for a number of articles and at least two books on those countries, and, much more important, the backgrounds of some of his major works. *The Power and the Glory* is set in Mexico, *The Heart of the Matter* and *A Burnt-Out Case* in Africa. Greene has now written at least twenty books which most of us would call novels, though it is interesting that he uses the word 'entertainment' to describe one or two of them, thus suggesting that he regards the novel as something with a serious purpose, beyond mere story-telling. *Stamboul Train* for instance, written in 1932 and being in many respects a thriller, is called 'An Entertainment', and so is the much later *Our Man in Havana* (1958). Curiously enough however *Brighton Rock*, which we are going to look at a little more closely, is also called (at least in some editions) 'An Entertainment'; and here we may be permitted to wonder whether Greene is merely trying to disarm critics like F.R. Leavis, who are fond of referring to the 'profound responsibility' of the novelist as distinct from the mere 'entertainer'. For *Brighton Rock*, though one may certainly read it as an entertainment, is anything but a superficial book. It is a subtle and horrifying study of evil.

On the surface *Brighton Rock* is something like a crime thriller, its characters being mostly near-criminal figures connected with race-course gangs and set against the colourful background of Whitsun holiday crowds. The central character is a youth called Pinkie Brown (though Greene usually refers to him simply as 'the Boy'), who has become leader of a violent gang consisting of some half-dozen men—all older and more experienced than he, but all dominated by his intense and horrifying will to power. They murder a man called Hale, member of a rival gang; and the action consists of Pinkie's efforts to evade justice, represented partly by the police, and partly (at what I take to be a symbolical level) by Ida Arnold, a jolly, vulgar woman, who 'senses' that Hale has been murdered, though the authorities at first think it is suicide.

At the time of his murder, Hale has been working for a newspaper called the *Daily Messenger*. Under the name of Kolley Kibber it is his job to circulate in Brighton during the holiday season:

In his pocket he had a packet of cards to distribute in hidden places along his route: those who found them would receive ten shillings from the *Messenger*, but the big prize was reserved for whoever challenged Hale in the proper form of words and with a copy of the *Messenger* in his hand: 'You are Mr Kolley Kibber. I claim the *Daily Messenger* prize.'

Owing to an error in planning, one of Pinkie's gang leaves a Kolley Kibber card on the table in a café, where it is picked up by a young waitress, Rose. Rose has in fact observed a man leaving the card, and believed him to have been the genuine Kolley Kibber, but it becomes clear that at that particular moment Kolley Kibber (Hale) was already dead. Thus it becomes necessary for Pinkie to silence the waitress, and this he does by winning her love, and eventually marrying her.

Pinkie's treatment of the simple and affectionate Rose is one of the most horrifying things in the book. Both of them have been brought up as Catholics in a Brighton slum, and the boy has been permanently harmed by his childhood experiences. Not only is he incapable of friendship or affection, but he has a sick hatred of sex which makes the idea of marriage repulsive to him. Yet he knows that he must go through with it if he is to make certain that Rose will not reveal what she knows about the circumstances of Hale's death. At one point Rose asks him to make a recording of his voice, using a slot-machine near the pier. At first he refuses, but she presses him: 'Perhaps one day you might be away somewhere and I could borrow a gramophone. And you'd speak.' Knowing that he cannot risk breaking with her, he agrees:

He went to the box and closed the door. There was a slot for his sixpence: a mouthpiece: an instruction, 'Speak clearly and close to the instrument.' The scientific paraphernalia made him nervous: he looked over his shoulder, and there outside she was watching him—without a smile; he saw her as a stranger: a shabby child from Nelson Place, and he was shaken by an appalling resentment. He put in a sixpence and speaking in a low voice for fear it might carry beyond the box he gave his message up to be graven on vulcanite: 'God damn you, you little bitch. why can't you go back home for ever and let me be?'; he heard the needle scratch and the record whir, then a click and silence.

Pinkie's predicament is that of a vulgar little Macbeth, driven further and further into evil by his fear of being discovered. He betrays one of his accomplices, Spicer, to a rival gang, who attack and kill him with razors before turning on Pinkie himself, who escapes. He then plans to rid himself of his child-wife, Rose, by arranging a suicide pact with her, his secret intention being that she shall shoot herself first, and that he will then be free. Such is his influence over the girl that she agrees to this, against her own wish and her own conscience:

She thought: I needn't say anything yet. I can take the gun and then—throw it out of the car, run away, do something to stop everything. But all the time she felt the steady pressure of his will. *His* mind was made up.

They drive to a cliff some way outside Brighton, and park their car, neither knowing that in fact the police are following. The climax of the story has the exciting cinematic quality which Greene often achieves. The police are around them, and Pinkie thinks that Rose and Dallow (a member of the gang) have betrayed him. In his pocket is a bottle of vitriol.

She could see his face indistinctly as it leant in over the little dashboard light. It was like a child's, badgered, confused, betrayed. . . He said: 'You little. . .' he didn't finish—the deputation approached, he left her, diving into his pocket for something. 'Come on, Dallow,' he said, 'you bloody squealer,' and put his hand up. Then she couldn't tell what happened: glass—somewhere—broke, he screamed and she saw his face—steam. He screamed and screamed, with his hands up to his eyes, he turned and ran; she saw a police baton at his feet, and broken glass. He looked half his size, doubled up in appalling agony; it was as if the flames had literally got him and he shrank—shrank into a schoolboy flying in panic and pain, scrambling over a fence, running on.

'Stop him,' Dallow cried; it wasn't any good: he was at the edge, he was over; they couldn't even hear a splash. It was as if he'd been withdrawn suddenly by a hand out of any existence—past or present, whipped away into zero—nothing.

After Pinkie's death Rose is moved to go to confession, and in her conversation with the old priest Greene makes clear the attitude towards evil—the sense of the reality of evil—which, as I have said, is a part of the spiritual and intellectual make-up of many Catholics.

'a Catholic. . . [says the priest] is more capable of evil than anyone. I think perhaps—because we believe in Him—we are more in touch with the Devil than other people. But ^{we are not} just hope. . . hope and pray.'

Brighton Rock is certainly not a comfortable book, and it ends on a note that is almost agonising. After leaving the priest Rose, feeling

now that she has at least some comfort in the memory of Pinkie's love, and the possibility that she will bear his child, makes her way to his lodgings to find the record of his voice which is now her most treasured possession:

There was something to be salvaged from that house. . . something else she wouldn't be able to get over—his voice speaking a message to her: if there was a child, speaking to the child. 'If he loved you,' the priest had said, 'that shows. . .' [that there was some good in him]. She walked rapidly in the thin June sunlight towards the worst horror of all.

When *Brighton Rock* was published in 1938 Graham Greene was thirty-four years old. He had already written five other novels, as well as being an experienced and successful journalist. At that time William Golding was twenty-seven; a schoolmaster whose first novel, *Lord of the Flies*, was not to appear until 1954 when he was already forty-three. Superficially it would be difficult to imagine two men more different, and the differences become even more apparent when we read what each has written about his own childhood and early education. The conception and style of their novels too are completely different. Yet both of them as writers are concerned—almost obsessed—with the same problem: the problem of evil.

William Golding was born in 1911, his parents being typical of the poor but educated lower-middle class. His childhood was spent in the quiet country town of Marlborough, where he was educated at the local grammar school. Later he won a scholarship to Oxford, and went up to Brasenose College. He became a schoolmaster and remained unknown to the public until the appearance of *Lord of the Flies*, which revealed him as one of the best and most original novelists of our time. Since then he has written *The Inheritors* (1955), *Pincher Martin* (1956), *Free Fall* (1959), *The Spire* (1964) and *The Pyramid* (1967).

Lord of the Flies is too well known to need any introduction here, though some people have found its title puzzling. It is a translation of the Hebrew 'Beelzebub', applied in the novel to the pig's head, rotting and covered with flies, which becomes the totem, or god, of the boys on their island. The idea of *Lord of the Flies* is that children, fazed by being innocent and good by nature, are at least half savage. Without guidance and control they would become fully savage. To write a novel in which all the characters are boys between six and thirteen years old is difficult indeed, but Golding has succeeded brilliantly—partly no doubt because of his experience as a teacher of

such boys. It is clear however that the boys on their island represent mankind as a whole: capable of goodness when ruled by law, morality or religion, yet falling back into savagery as soon as this rule is relaxed. For many readers the scene where twelve-year-old Simon is ritually killed by a crowd of children chanting 'Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!' is one of the most horrifying in modern literature.

In *The Inheritors* Golding again limits himself deliberately to characters who show human nature in its most basic and primitive form: men and women of a time long before the dawn of history, struggling towards good, yet defeated by their own nature. The problem of writing about people whose language has not developed beyond the stage of mere noise is one which he accepts and solves with great skill. In *Pincher Martin*, again setting himself a problem which many novelists would find insoluble, he constructs a novel with virtually a single character: a shipwrecked sailor dying alone on a rock in mid-Atlantic. The theme here, and again in *Free Fall*, is the basic evil from which mankind cannot escape because it grows out of mankind's own will.

There are some readers to whom Golding will appear as a deeply pessimistic writer. He belongs, we must remember, to a generation which has lived through two world wars. His sense of the power of evil, like Graham Greene's, is expressed in almost everything he has written; yet (and this is the important point) evil can only be understood because good also exists. This is made clear not only in *The Spire*, which we shall examine more fully in a moment, but in *The Pyramid* which a newspaper critic described as 'Golding's most approachable novel'.

The Pyramid indeed is very far from being the work of a pessimist or a cynic, and it is perhaps significant that Golding dedicates it 'For My Son David'. Although one reads it as a novel, it consists of three 'long short stories', or *novelle*, closely linked because they concern the same people and the same town, Stilbury. Stilbury seems very much like Marlborough in the 1920s and 1930s, and the characters are clearly based on real people known to Golding in those days. There is something almost Dickensian about these characters, and the book has a strong comic element. It should certainly be read by anyone who thinks of William Golding as a gloomy and 'apocalyptic' writer. Even in *The Pyramid* however the conflict between good and evil remains his great theme. This is well seen in the following. The 'I' of the story, a boy of eighteen just about to leave school and go to Oxford, has a short-lived affair with the local 'bad girl', Rose. After making love to her, he is deeply shocked when she tells him that

she has for several years been the sexual partner of Captain Wilmot, an unpleasantly sadistic middle-aged man, crippled in the First World War. Evie explains that she was sorry for him. Lying beside her on the edge of a wood just outside the town, the young man sees in the distance his home, with his father and mother in the garden. He is horrified by the contrast between that happy, innocent world and the dark, evil world which Evie has shown him. Momentarily he sees the girl not as a person but as an object—a strange and rather frightening object.

I looked away from her, down at the town. Made brighter by the shade under the alders, it was full of colour, and placid. I looked at our wall, the bathroom window, the window of the dispensary, our little garden—and there were my parents, standing side by side on the grass. I could see how my father stood, looking down at a flower bed, while my mother bent in her active way from the waist and picked among the flowers. They were too far off for me to recognise them by anything but their surroundings and their movements, my father a dark grey patch, my mother a light grey one. All at once, I had a tremendous feeling of there-ness and hereness, of separate worlds, they and Imogen, clean in that coloured picture; here this object, on an earth that smelt of decay, with picked bones and natural cruelty—life's lavatory.

The Spire (1964) is probably less well known than *Lord of the Flies*, and that is why I have chosen to describe it here. It could, I suppose, be catalogued as a historical novel. It is set in the Middle Ages—the period when most of the great cathedrals of Europe were built—and it is clear that Golding did a great deal of research into the social history of the time and the methods used by the builders. As in Golding's other novels however there is an important element of allegory in the book. It is indeed a sort of parable or moral fable which (like *Lord of the Flies*) gives indirect expression to its author's beliefs about the reality of good and evil: the eternal and often fruitful conflict between them.

The central character, Jocelin, is Dean of a great cathedral (probably Salisbury, though Golding does not actually say so) in the twelfth or thirteenth century. Against the advice of the cathedral Chapter (azors b. L. Committee) Jocelin is determined to build a great spire, Wrid hit guide cathedral's central tower and rising to a height of four hrite, an oset. Against every kind of difficulty—including his own war, kness and wickedness and the reasoned opposition of the master-builder, Roger Mason—he drives the work forward, becoming more

and more obsessed with his purpose, more and more convinced that it is also God's purpose. He is expressing this when Roger tries to explain that the work is impossible because there is no firm ground to build on:

'Now I'll tell you what no one else knows. They think I'm mad perhaps; but what does that matter? They'll know about it one day when I—but you shall hear it now, as man to man, on this very stump of a tower, up here with no one else to listen. My son. The building is a diagram of prayer; and our spire will be a diagram of the highest prayer of all. God revealed it to me in a vision, his unprofitable servant. He chose me. He chooses you, to fill the diagram with glass and iron and stone, since the children of men require a thing to look at. D'you think you can escape? You're not in my net—oh yes, Roger, I understand a number of things, how you are drawn, and twisted, and tormented—but it isn't my net. It's His. We can neither of us avoid this work. And there's another thing. I've begun to see how we can't understand it either, since each new foot reveals a new effect, a new purpose. It's senseless, you think. It frightens us, and it's unreasonable. But then—since when did God ask the chosen ones to be reasonable? They call this Jocelin's Folly, don't they?'

'I've heard it called so.'

'The net isn't mine, Roger, and the folly isn't mine. It's God's Folly. Even in the old days he never asked men to do what was reasonable. Men can do that for themselves. They can buy and sell, heal and govern. But then out of some deep place comes the command to do what makes no sense at all—to build a ship on dry land; to sit among the dunghills; to marry a whore; to set their son on the altar of sacrifice. Then, if men gave faith, a new thing comes.'

He was silent for a while, in the prickling rain, looking at Roger Mason's back. It was my voice that spoke the words, he thought. No. Not my voice. Voice of the devouring Will, my master.'

As the story goes on we learn of certain events which have happened in the more-or-less-distant past: the money for building the ^{of, are, and} has come from Jocelin's aunt, Alison, who became rich because ^{the} king's mistress; as a young priest, Jocelin himself has had ^{with a girl} with a girl, afterwards arranging for her to marry a man called Pa ^{whose} whose duty it is to clean the cathedral. At the beginning of the ^{the} Pangall mysteriously disappears as his young wife is seduced by Roger

Mason. Roger's wife, Rachel, learns of his unfaithfulness, and her jealous rage contributes to the girl's death. The whole cathedral seems filled with evil, symbolised by the great pit which opens up under the half-built spire and threatens to engulf the whole structure in its slime. We are made to feel, as Jocelin himself feels, that devils have taken possession of the place and the great army of men working in it. Yet the work must go on and on, and the spire must grow up and up.

Jocelin's fellow priests—the cautious, worldly-wise men who make up the Chapter—call for the Bishop to enquire into their Dean's 'madness'. By now Mass is no longer celebrated in the cathedral because everyone expects the tower and the spire to come crashing down. The Bishop (acting as the official 'Visitor' of the cathedral) holds his enquiry and questions Jocelin:

'Would you agree that the, what is referred to here as "The Rich Fabric of Constant Praise", has been unnecessarily interrupted?'

Jocelin nodded emphatically.

'It's true. How true it is! So true!'

'Explain then.'

'Before we began to build, we sealed off the east end as best we could, and held the services in the Lady Chapel.'

'It's the common practice.'

'So at that time the services continued. But later, you see, men felt there was some danger. When the pillars began to sing, and then bend, there was none of the chapter, none of the laity, no one who dared to worship there.'

'In fact the services of the church came to an end?'

Jocelin looked up quickly and spread his hands.

'No. Not if you can see—all the complications. I was there, all the time. It was a kind of service. I was there, and they were there, adding glory to the house.'

'They?'

'The workmen. There were fewer and fewer of them, of course; but some stayed right to the end.'

As the Visitor's enquiry goes on, Jocelin's replies seeming more and more unjust (at least by the practical and everyday standards of his time), that he is mad. The great spire which he claims to have built in the glory of God is the work of men who are no better than

'... These workmen who stayed with you to the end. Were they good men?'

'Oh yes!'

'Good men?'

'Very good, very good indeed!'

But papers were being shuffled on the long table. The Visitor took one and began to read from it, in an unemotional voice.

'"Murderers, cutthroats, rowdies, brawlers, rapers, notorious fornicators, sodomites, atheists, or worse."'

'I—No.'

The Visitor was looking at him over the paper.

'Good men?'

Jocelin struck his right fist into the palm of the other.

'They were bold men!'

The story ends with Jocelin's death. From his bed he can see the completed spire pointing calmly towards heaven, yet he is tormented by the thought that it has grown out of human evil, human quarrels, human hatred, 'life's lavatory' in Golding's own phrase in *The Pyramid*. In a moment of vision he sees the everlasting truth, the truth which (it seems to me) Golding is expressing in almost all his work, the truth which Christians understand in the phrase 'original sin': 'There is no innocent work. God knows where God may be.'

I must end this chapter with a short explanation to the reader. If he is a beginner in the study of English literature he may be disappointed that I have said little or nothing about some of the greatest novelists: Dickens for example or Henry James or Joseph Conrad or D. H. Lawrence. If on the other hand he has already read widely, he may think that the examples I have chosen for detailed treatment are too obvious. Surely (he may say) *everyone* has read *Jane Eyre* and *Tess* and *Brighton Rock*. Clearly it is impossible to satisfy both types of reader. I must explain however that the amount of space I have given to any particular novelist is no indication of his importance. Dickens for one is so well known to everyone that it would be a waste of space to say much about him here. Richardson and Smollett and Fielding on the other hand are not so well known; yet they are figures of great importance in the history of the novel. If I have said very little about them it is only because their books are unlikely to interest the ordinary reader, be he English or foreign. Most of the novels I have chosen can be read with enjoyment by anyone who has a good understanding of modern spoken English.

The following list of English novelists is for the general information of the foreign reader. Many of them, if not most, are too difficult

to be read with pleasure by anyone without a very advanced knowledge of English. Others, and especially those marked with a star (*), are comparatively easy, and can be enjoyed by most foreign readers. The particular novels named after each writer are not necessarily his 'best' or even his most typical, but the ones by which he is most widely known to the ordinary educated Englishman, whether he has read them or not. The sensible thing to do with a novel one finds difficult or boring (whatever language it is in) is to put it away and go on to something one likes better. No novel is worth reading if it cannot be read with enjoyment; but it is important to add that no enjoyment can be got without some effort.

John Bunyan (1628-88): not strictly a novelist, but *The Pilgrim's Progress** and *The Life and Death of Mr Badman* have many of the qualities of the novel.

Daniel Defoe (1660-1731): *Moll Flanders**; *Robinson Crusoe**. Many people deceive themselves into thinking that they have read the latter, though in fact they have seen only a children's version.

Samuel Richardson (1689-1761): *Pamela*; *Clarissa Harlowe*; *Sir Charles Grandison*. Richardson is sometimes called 'the father of the English novel'.

Henry Fielding (1707-54): *Joseph Andrews**; *Tom Jones*.

Lawrence Sterne (1713-68): *Tristram Shandy*.

Tobias Smollett (1721-71): *Roderick Random*; *Humphry Clinker*.

Oliver Goldsmith (1730-74): *The Vicar of Wakefield**. Goldsmith was not primarily a novelist; he is probably better known for his comedy *She Stoops to Conquer*, and his poem *The Deserted Village*.

Walter Scott (1771-1832): *Kenilworth* is possibly the best novel to start with. Of the less-known ones *Anne of Geierstein* is most readable.

Jane Austen (1775-1817): *Pride and Prejudice**; *Persuasion*; *Northanger Abbey**, which is largely a 'skit' on the so-called 'Terror School' of novelists; *Emma**; *Sense and Sensibility**.

Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866): *Nightmare Abbey*; *The Mis-
fuzors b. L. I. phin*. Peacock is an acquired taste; he is quite unlike any
Wrid hit guist, but those of us who admire him are likely to become
hrite. p. no.

Charles Reade (1814-84): *The Cloister and the Hearth*; *Hard Cash*.
The former is a well-known historical romance; the latter is a con-

temporary novel intended in part as an attack on the treatment of the insane in Reade's time.

Charlotte Brontë (1816–55): *Jane Eyre**; *Villette*, which is based on her own experiences as a governess in Brussels.

Emily Brontë (1818–48): *Wuthering Heights**.

George Eliot the pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans (1819–80): *Silas Marner**; *The Mill on the Floss**; *Middlemarch*, a political and sociological novel—not easy without a fair background knowledge of the period; *Adam Bede**.

Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81): *Sybil, or The Two Nations*.

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–63): *Vanity Fair*; *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq.*

Charles Dickens (1812–70): the greatest and one of the most prolific of English novelists. *Oliver Twist**; *David Copperfield**; *A Tale of Two Cities**; *Great Expectations**.

Anthony Trollope (1815–82): *Barchester Towers*, one of the several novels which Trollope wrote about life in a cathedral city; *The Prime Minister*, one of his series of political novels; *The Claverings**.

George Meredith (1828–1909): *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*; *The Egoist*.

Samuel Butler (1835–1902): *The Way of All Flesh*; *Erewhon* (see Chapter VI).

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928): *Under the Greenwood Tree**; *The Mayor of Casterbridge**; *The Return of the Native**; *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*; *The Trumpet Major**. Hardy also wrote the massive epic drama, *The Dynasts* (see page 34).

Henry James (1843–1916): *The Aspern Papers**; *The Turn of the Screw**, a long-short ghost story, the basis of the libretto of Benjamin Britten's opera of the same name; *Portrait of a Lady**; *Washington Square**; *The Spoils of Poynton**. A difficult novelist for inexperienced readers.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94): *Kidnapped** is one of several adventure stories in which Stevenson set a pattern followed by many later writers, notably John Buchan. *Weir of Hermiston*, of which he left unfinished and which is said to show that he would have become a really great novelist had he lived longer.

George Moore (1852–1933): *Esther Waters*; *The Brook Kerith*, an extremely interesting novel about the life and times of Christ.

George Gissing (1857-1903): *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Gissing was a 'sociological' writer in the sense that he was sharply aware of the cruelties and injustices of his time.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924): *The Nigger of the Narcissus*; *Lord Jim*; *The Rover*; *Youth**; *Heart of Darkness**. A Polish master-mariner who learned English well enough to become a major English novelist.

Herbert George Wells (1866-1946): a master of science fiction for example in *The War of the Worlds*; *The Time Machine**; *The Sleeper Awakes*; and a serious novelist in the tradition of Dickens: *Mr Polly**; *Kipps**; *Ann Veronica*.

Arnold Bennett (1867-1931): *The Old Wives' Tale*; *The Clayhanger Family* (a series of novels). A 'regional' novelist who wrote about the Potteries towns and their inhabitants.

John Galsworthy (1867-1933): *The Forsyte Saga*. If it seems too long, the novels which compose it can be read individually. Galsworthy was also a successful dramatist: *Strife*; *Escape*; *Loyalties*.

W. Somerset Maugham (1874-1965): *Of Human Bondage*; *Cakes and Ale**; *The Razor's Edge*; *The Moon and Sixpence**. (For Maugham's short stories see page 219.)

E. M. Forster (1879-1970): *The Longest Journey**; *A Room with a View**; *Howards End*.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941): *Mrs Dalloway*; *To the Lighthouse*.

James Joyce (1882-1941): (see page 116), *Ulysses*; *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930): *Sons and Lovers**; *The Man Who Died*; *The Virgin and the Gipsy**. The two last are examples of the long-short-story in which Lawrence was, I think, much more successful than in most of his novels.

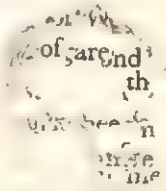
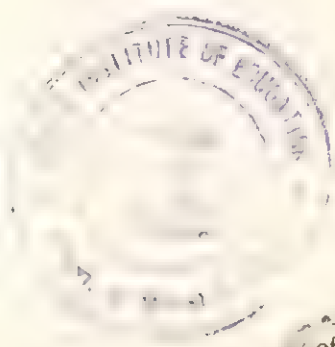
Aldous Huxley (1894-1963): *Antic Hay*; *Point Counter Point*; *Crome Yellow*; *Brave New World*.

J. B. Priestley (born 1894): *The Good Companions**; *Festival at Fair-
winds* b. 1914

W. G. Sebald (born 1895): *I, Claudius*; *Claudius the God*; *Count
Dracula*; *Wife to Mr Milton*.

H. G. Wells (born 1895): *Eustace and Hilda**; *The Go-Between**; *The War of the Worlds*; *The Brickfield*.

- Evelyn Waugh** (1903-66): *Decline and Fall**; *Vile Bodies**; *Brideshead Revisited*; *The Sword of Honour*.
- Christopher Isherwood** (born 1904): *Mr Norris Changes Trains*; *Goodbye to Berlin*; *Sally Bowles*.
- Graham Greene** (born 1904): *Stamboul Train**; *Brighton Rock*; *The Power and the Glory*; *Our Man in Havana**; *The Heart of the Matter**.
- H. E. Bates** (born 1905): *The Purple Plain**. (For Bates's short stories see page 225.)
- Anthony Powell** (born 1905): *Afternoon Men*; *The Acceptance World*; *At Lady Molly's*; *The Kindly Ones*.
- C. P. Snow** (born 1905): *The Masters**; *The New Men**; *The Affair**.
- William Golding** (born 1911): *Lord of the Flies**; *The Inheritors*; *The Spire*; *The Pyramid* (see page 140).
- Pamela Hansford Johnson** (Lady Snow) (born 1912): *The Humbler Creation*; *The Unspeakable Skipton*.
- Iris Murdoch** (born 1914): *The Bell**; *A Severed Head*; *The Sandcastle**; *The Unicorn*.
- Kingsley Amis** (born 1922): *Lucky Jim**; *That Uncertain Feeling*; *Take a Girl Like You*.



CHAPTER SIX

Satire

Nearly everybody is a satirist in a small way: the schoolboy who writes rude words about his teacher; the comedian on television who does a life-like imitation of the Prime Minister; even you and I, sitting in the pub or coffee bar and complaining about the wickedness of the world and the foolishness of our leaders. The real satirist however differs from most of us, both in the strength of his feeling and in having the wit and genius to express it in novel or poem or play. He must have some of the qualities of the moralist or the preacher, and some of the qualities of the clown—because the best way of attacking wickedness and foolishness is by laughing at them.

In this chapter I propose to choose six great English satirists and to say something about the work of each. Two of them are poets: Dryden and Pope; four of them are novelists or prose writers: Swift, Peacock, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. All six might be called primary satirists in the sense that their chief purpose (at least in the works we shall be studying here) was clearly satirical. We must remember however that much other literature (especially novels) contains elements of satire, even when the writer's chief purpose was non-satirical. Let us look at a few examples before turning to the six major satirists.

Chaucer (see page 34) was too gentle and humane a man to be a great satirist. In general he loved the world and his fellow human beings and saw no reason to attack them; he was himself a government servant and he saw no reason to attack that either. The one thing he hated was the lack of morality of the church, and this he did attack—not bitterly or savagely as Milton might have done, but simply by exposing it. In the *Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* we are introduced to fewer than seven characters belonging to the church, five of them, the poor country Parson, is truly good and spiritual, the rest are either worldly, like the Prioress and the Monk, or actually criminal, like the Summoner (an official who summoned people to court) and the Pardoner (a man who sold pardons for sins).

on behalf of the Church). Even these however are described in a good-tempered way; Chaucer does not invite us to hate them, but to laugh at them. It might be argued that this sort of light-hearted satire is more effective in the end than the fierce indignation of a Juvenal (a great Roman satirist and poet of the first century) or the bitterness and anger of a Swift (see page 162).

Shakespeare, like Chaucer, is not usually thought of as a satirist; yet there are often satirical touches in his work, and some of the plays are almost wholly satirical. *Love's Labour's Lost* for example, written about 1594 when Shakespeare was a 'brilliant young man' (something like Sir Noel Coward in the 1920s), is an amusing satire on what is now called 'the sex war': there is much fun at the expense of foolishly affected courtiers, and stupid schoolmasters like Holofernes. *As You Like It* satirises various fashionable features of the 1590s. The idea that it is clever to be cynical or melancholy is laughed at in the characters of Jaques and his imitator, Touchstone. So is the belief that there is something specially virtuous about what is called 'the simple life'. Even the extremes of romantic love are shown as being slightly ridiculous: when Orlando talks of dying for love Rosalind tells him he is talking nonsense, 'Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them. But not for love!' Most of Shakespeare's satire is like Chaucer's—amusing and good-tempered. *Troilus and Cressida* however is a bitter attack on the wickedness of human nature. Almost every character in the play is wicked or weak. Greed, brutality and sexual lust or lechery, seem to fill the world—'lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery' as Thersites complains when observing the conduct of his 'betters'—the heroes and leaders on both sides of the Graeco-Trojan war.

Dickens was another great writer who, although not generally thought of as a satirist, often used his influence as a novelist to attack and criticise the social injustices of his time: poverty, bad education, inefficiency in government and law, shocking inequalities of wealth and so on. One of the chief events in *Bleak House* is the never-ending law case between Jarndyce and Jarndyce, which drags on year after year until most of the people concerned are either dead or financially ruined. The terrible slowness with which the law works in England (and no doubt in other countries) has been the subject of much satire, of which this attack in *Bleak House* is the most famous. In *Hard Times* Dickens makes a similar, and amusing, attack on the well-known slowness of government officials in his description of the Circumlocution Office. Much of this novel is set against the background of the Marshalsea debtor's prison, in which Dickens's father (see *David Copperfield* as Mr Micawber) had spent some time when Dickens was a

It would be quite possible to continue, mentioning a hundred important English writers whose work contains strong satirical elements, even though they are not primarily satirists. The list would not only include such novelists as Jane Austen, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, H. G. Wells and William Golding, but comic dramatists from Sheridan to Shaw, and almost every important playwright of the last twenty years.

One other thing which it might be useful to consider before turning to Dryden and the other satirists I have chosen is the question of satirical method: what sort of weapons does the satirist use in his attack on the wickedness and foolishness of mankind?

The simplest weapon is invective, defined in the dictionary as 'a violent attack in words'. Invective is sometimes exchanged between angry motorists after a small accident, or between excited supporters at a football match. Used by the satirist it must of course be controlled by good taste and the law of libel. The latter can sometimes cause serious difficulties to a writer who attacks people who are alive and recognisable, as Aldous Huxley did in *Point Counter Point* in the 1920s, and as Hilaire Belloc (see page 238) did at about the same time in his *Lines to a Don*. It should be explained that 'don' is a word used in most English universities, and especially in Oxford and Cambridge, for professors and other high-level teachers. The particular don in the poem was a famous historian who had quarrelled with Belloc's friend, G. K. Chesterton (see page 238). Chesterton, a well-known journalist, poet and short-story writer, was the inventor of the priest-detective, Father Brown, a popular character in the 1930s. As a keen Roman Catholic (like Belloc himself) Chesterton had sentimental and romantic ideas about the Church in the Middle Ages. These had been rightly attacked by the don in question (an equally keen Protestant) and Belloc replied with this splendid, if unreasonable, piece of invective. By repeating the short, hard sound of 'don' over and over again he emphasises his contempt as though with the blows of a hammer:

Remote and ineffectual Don
That dared attack my Chesterton,
With that poor weapon, half-impelled,
Unlearnt, unsteady, hardly held,
Unworthy for a tilt with men—
Your quavering and corroded pen:
Don poor at Bed, and worse at Table,
Don pinched, Don starved, Don miserable;
Don stuttering, Don with roving eyes,
Don nervous, Don of crudities:

Don clerical, Don ordinary,
 Don self-absorbed and solitary;
 Don here-and-there, Don epileptic,
 Don puffed and empty, Don dyspeptic;
 Don middle-class, Don sycophantic,
 Don dull, Don brutish, Don pedantic;
 Don hypocritical, Don bad,
 Don furtive, Don threequarters mad;

Nobody would pretend that this is satire at its most serious: it is too personal and too trivial; the sort of thing that a clever schoolboy might write. But it has the spirit and the energy which makes fine invective, and it succeeds (at least for the moment) in making us share the writer's scorn and hate for the don.

Invective is the simplest and most direct of the satirist's weapons; irony is less direct, but no less effective. It is not easy to define irony exactly, but we can begin from the dictionary: 'the expression of one's meaning by language of opposite or different tendency, especially the adoption of another's views or tone.' In ordinary conversation irony is often expressed by a tone of voice: the words 'She's a fine example of a faithful wife' for example can be spoken (by stressing 'She's' and 'fine') in such a way as to mean exactly the opposite of what they seem to mean. In written English an ironical intention becomes clear from the context: if a historian were to write, 'The result of this wise and statesmanlike decision was one of the most destructive wars in European history' it would be clear that 'wise and statesmanlike' was being used ironically. It is generally agreed that Swift, whom we shall be looking at more closely soon, was one of the great masters of irony.

The most important of all the satirist's weapons is his ability to amuse and entertain the reader. Without this satire becomes merely tedious and bad tempered. Many people in the twentieth century have been worried about the possible misuses of science and technology by governments. Historians, sociologists and journalists have written millions of words about it; but by far the most effective warnings have come from imaginative writers like H. G. Wells (1866-1946), Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) and George Orwell (1903-1950). This is because books like *The Shape of Things to Come*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have been read by millions of people with enjoyment. The best example of all is *Gulliver's Travels*, which one can easily read as a story without realising that it is satirical intention at all. The books I have just mentioned (we

be returning to them later) are all alike in using the idea of an imaginary state with which the reader is invited to compare the actual England he lives in. They might be described as 'negative utopias' because they are all in some sense imitations of the original utopia of Sir Thomas More (1478-1535).

More is best remembered now for his gentle and reasoned opposition to Henry VIII in the matter of Catharine of Aragon's divorce. For this he was executed, and is now regarded as a saint and martyr of the Catholic Church. The *Utopia*, first written in Latin, describes an ideal state with freedom of religion, equality for men and women, a universal system of education and common ownership of property. The word More invented for his island of perfection (it is the Greek for nowhere) has now become the common English word for any ideal community. When a politician describes the plan of some other politician as utopian he generally means that it is too idealistic—too good to be practicable. Now the writer of a utopia—whether More himself or Bacon (see page 229) or H. G. Wells—cannot correctly be called a satirist: yet it is clear that any picture of the world as it ought to be must be an unspoken criticism of the world as it is. There is therefore a strong link between the satirist and the inventor of a utopia.

This can be seen in the second book of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*: the inhabitants of Brobdingnag are not only a hundred times bigger than human beings, but also a hundred times better; so they are deeply shocked at what Gulliver tells them about his fellow-Europeans, concluding that they must be 'the most pernicious race of little odious vermin the Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.' It is not usual however for the imaginary world of the satirist to be a utopia: it is much more likely to be what I have called a negative utopia—not a picture, like More's, of how good the world might be, but a warning, like Orwell's, of how bad it might become. Sometimes it is simply a caricature, or a slightly twisted mirror-image, of the world as it already is—like the mirror-image of ourselves with a new dress or a new hair-style which we see unexpectedly in a shop-window. At first we do not recognise it; when we do, we exclaim, 'Good God! Is that really me?'

One of the strangest and most interesting examples of a satirist's negative utopia is *Erewhon*, by the Victorian writer Samuel Butler—who is often referred to as 'Erewhon Butler', a very witty pun on the name of the satirist from 'Hudibras Butler' (1612-80) who wrote the poem of that name. Butler's intention to write a negative utopia is suggested by his title, because (as the reader may have guessed) 'Erewhon' is (more or less) 'nowhere' written backwards.

Judged as a serious work of literature *Erewhon* is probably a failure. It is too long and too confused to hold the reader's interest, and Butler never seems to be quite certain what he is attacking. It is however full of clever and amusing ideas, many of which apply to the England of 1972 almost as much as they did to the England of 1872 when the book was first published. The Erewhonians had for example some interesting ideas about machines, about crime and punishment, and about education and religion.

The most important event in the history of Erewhon had been the revolt against the machines. People had found themselves more and more in the power of machines of all kinds, and the machines had started to develop minds and wills of their own. (The modern reader will immediately think of computers, motor cars and mechanical hearts, lungs or brains.) In the end there had been a revolution, and a general destruction of all kinds of machinery. This was recorded in the book to which Erewhonians attached great importance, *The Book of the Machines*, from which Butler pretends to quote long and rather tedious passages. It is typical of him indeed that his skill in inventing new and original ideas was never quite equalled by his ability in developing them. This makes *Erewhon* a difficult book to read. It can best be enjoyed by those who are good at going through a book quickly without reading all of it.

The Erewhonian attitude to crime was not unlike that of the most enlightened and progressive thinkers of our own times; it was treated exactly as though it were a form of sickness. If a man stole money from his neighbour, or made a cruel attack on some innocent person, he would be sent to bed and treated with great kindness and consideration. Friends would visit him and bring flowers; and the news would go round that poor Mr X was suffering from a bad attack of stealing or assault or whatever crime it was. It would probably also be necessary to send for the 'straightener', who would suggest the correct kind of medicine or treatment. But if anyone caught a cold, or influenza, he was treated as a criminal: his family would be ashamed, and his friends would avoid him. The same treatment was given to people who suffered from unhappiness or bad luck. Butler describes a visit to the Erewhonian law courts where a young man, after being tried for 'the great crime of labouring under pulmonary consumption', was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour. An equally severe sentence was passed by the Personal Bereavement Court of a man found to have lost a wife to whom he was deeply devoted. The punishment used by lawyers and moralists in such cases was clearly intended to assist Nature in her purposes. It is the duty of the law to assist Nature in her purposes. It is

altogether clear what Butler meant when he described these strange attitudes towards crime and sickness: if, as seems probable, he wanted to suggest that the treatment of criminals in nineteenth-century England was too soft, one can only wonder what he would think of it today.

Butler had strong opinions about education, which in his time was based almost entirely on the study of Greek and Latin literature. It seemed to him ridiculous (as it seems to most of us now) that young men and women should spend many years in learning to read and write dead languages, not just for pleasure or interest (which would be sensible enough), but because it was thought to 'train the mind' and to be a good preparation for life. In *Erewhon* the whole of education was based on what was called the Hypothetical Language, a language which was never actually used, but which everyone who hoped for a good job was expected to know:

... The store they set by this hypothetical language can hardly be believed; they will even give anyone a maintenance for life if he obtains a considerable proficiency in the study of it; nay, they will spend years in learning to translate some of their own good poetry into the hypothetical language—to do so with fluency being reckoned a distinguishing mark of a scholar and a gentleman.

The *Erewhonian* Musical Banks, which Butler described in some detail, were caricatures of the English churches. They were large and splendid buildings where business was done to a musical accompaniment. All respectable *Erewhonians* liked to be seen visiting a Bank once or twice a week, but the money they kept there was quite different from the money used in ordinary life: they behaved quite differently in the Banks from the way they acted during the week.

The importance of Butler as a satirist is not so much that he himself was a great writer as that the negative utopia of *Erewhon* has had a considerable influence on all later satire. It is full of amusing ideas, and the strange life and character of Butler himself (pictured in his autobiographical novel *The Way of All Flesh*, 1903) is well worth studying by anyone interested in nineteenth-century England. We must leave him now however and turn back to our six major satirists.

John Dryden (1631–1700) has already been mentioned (see page 69) as a satirist. He was one of the most productive of all English writers, widely admired in his own time (he was nicknamed 'Glorious'). He was successful in almost every field of literature. As a keen royalist, he welcomed the restoration of King Charles II in 1660 with a poem called *Astraea Redux*, and afterwards used his poetic genius to

make public comments on the events of the time. In this respect he can be thought of as a poet-journalist—a type of writer unusual in the history of English literature. His *Annus Mirabilis* for example, is a brilliant account in verse of the events of the year 1665–6, which included not only a series of naval battles against the Dutch, but also the Great Fire, which destroyed a large part of London during four days and nights of September 1666.

The most important of Dryden's satires is *Absalom and Achitophel*, which appeared in 1681. Unfortunately, like most of his work, it is not easily understood or appreciated by a reader who is ignorant of the historical events it describes or the names of the people from the Bible he uses. Lord Shaftesbury (Achitophel in the poem) was trying to persuade Parliament, against the wish of Charles II, to prevent the Duke of York from succeeding to the crown on the grounds that he was a Catholic. Shaftesbury's group wanted to ensure that the next king would be Charles's illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth (Absalom in the poem). Dryden's purpose was to persuade the reading public that Shaftesbury and his friends were not to be trusted. Disguising his characters under Old Testament names he drew a clever parallel between the situation of Charles II and that of King David, distressed by the rebellion of his son Absalom. The English (disguised in the poem as the Jews) are shown as being endlessly difficult and quarrelsome about religion:

The Jews, a headstrong, moody, murmuring race,
As ever tried the extent and stretch of Grace:
God's pampered people whom, debauched with ease,
No king could govern, nor no God could please:
(Gods had they tried of every shape and size
That God-smiths could produce, or priests devise).

Shaftesbury is described in a famous piece of invective as leader of those who opposed the king, and were therefore (in Dryden's royalist eyes) ungrateful and evil men:

Of these the false Achitophel was first:
A name to all succeeding ages curst.
For close designs and crooked counsels fit;
Sagacious, bold, and turbulent of wit;
Restless, unfixt in principles and place;
In power unpleased, impatient of disgrace.
A fiery soul, which working out its way

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Fretted the pigmy body to decay;
 And o'r informed the tenement of clay.
 A daring pilot in extremity;
 Pleased with the danger, when the waves went high
 He sought the storms; but for a calm unfit,
 Would steer too nigh the sands, to boast his wit.
 Great wits are sure to madness near allied;
 And thin partitions do their bounds divide:
 Else why should he, with wealth and honour blest,
 Refuse his age the needful hours of rest?
 Punish a body which he could not please,
 Bankrupt of life, yet prodigal of ease? . . .
 In friendship false, implacable in hate,
 Resolved to ruin, or to rule the state.

Absalom and Achitophel was so popular with the royalist public that Dryden and Nahum Tate (who was famous for altering *King Lear* to give it a happy ending) wrote a second part to it, published in the following year (1682). For the modern reader the whole poem naturally has none of the news-like quality which made it so successful when it first appeared. It can still be enjoyed however (though not without the assistance of notes) as one of the most powerful verse satires in the language. Dryden wrote it when he was fifty years old, by which time he had complete mastery over the kind of verse known as heroic couplets (see page 100). Verse of this sort, which seems to most English ears to be the perfect medium for satirical wit and invective, was also used in Dryden's later satires, *Mac Flecknoe* and *The Medal* (both published in 1682) and *The Hind and the Panther* (1687). This last, although in part satirical, is chiefly a philosophical poem about religion—the Panther being the Church of England, and the Hind the Roman Catholic Church to which Dryden had been converted the previous year.

About the time of Dryden's death in 1700 the next great satirist for us to discuss, Alexander Pope, was twelve years old, living with his parents at Binfield in Windsor Forest, and already suffering from the disability which was to make his life (to use his own bitter phrase) 'a life of disease'. As a young admirer and imitator of Dryden, Pope would not have written in heroic couplets with the same ease and fluency. Indeed he might have said that he wrote too easily, and that his work was a mark of Dryden's strength or energy. We have already seen that in Pope's other poetry (see page 98), and in this chapter we are concerned only with his satire.

I must say at once that I myself find it difficult to admire or appreciate much of Pope's satire, though I regard him in other respects as one of our greatest poets. I say this (and perhaps the reader will disagree with me) because I think the importance of a satire must depend largely upon the importance of what is being satirised. *Gulliver's Travels* is a great satire because Swift was attacking the wickedness of the whole human race: what Christians call original sin. Swift's modern successors, Huxley and Orwell, were attacking the whole of what is now called western civilisation. Dryden had attacked certain politicians and leaders—the sort of men who, whatever their personal qualities, are able for better or worse to influence the lives of millions of people.

When we read Pope's satire on the other hand we find him attacking individuals of no particular importance (using his genius as a writer to carry on small private wars against inferior writers who had been unlucky enough to annoy him) and so giving undeserved importance to men who would otherwise have been forgotten. Pope's long satirical poem *The Dunciad* for example is a brilliant attack in epic style on the almost forgotten poet and dramatist, Colley Cibber, together with several other writers of even less importance. His *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* and his various *Imitations of Horace* are equally brilliant but equally personal (and even trivial) in their choice of subjects. In short when we think of Pope as a 'great' satirist we are admiring his literary skill—his technical mastery—rather than his moral purpose. I am far from arguing that *all* literature must have a moral purpose, but it seems to me that satire is one kind of literature which can scarcely exist without it. Let me illustrate by quoting some famous lines from Pope's attack on Lord Hervey in the prologue to his *Satires and Epistles of Horace Imitated*. It should be explained that Hervey (Pope called him Sporus or Lord Fanny), together with Lady Wortley Montagu, had published an attack on Pope in which they had referred with truly aristocratic insolence to his 'low' birth. He therefore had some reason for the anger and hate which inspired the lines:

Let Sporus tremble—What? that thing of silk,
Sporus, that mere white curd of ass's milk?
Satire or sense, alas! can Sporus feel?
Who breaks a butterfly upon a wheel?
Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings,
This painted child of dirt that stinks and stings:
Whose buzz the witty and the fair annoys,
Yet wit ne'er tastes, and beauty ne'er enjoys:
So well-bred spaniels civilly delight

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In mumbling of the game they dare not bite.
 Eternal smiles his emptiness betray,
 As shallow streams run dimpling all the way.
 Whether in florid impotence he speaks,
 And, as the prompter breathes, the puppet squeaks:
 Or, at the ear of Eve, familiar toad,
 Half froth, half venom, spits himself abroad,
 In puns, or politics, or tales, or lies,
 Or spite, or smut, or rhymes, or blasphemies.
 His wit all see-saw, between that and this,
 Now high, now low, now master up, now miss,
 And he himself one vile antithesis.
 Amphibious thing! that acting either part,
 The trifling head, or the corrupted heart;
 Fop at the toilet, flatterer at the board,
 Now trips a lady, and now struts a lord.
 Eve's tempter thus the Rabbins have expressed,
 A cherub's face, a reptile all the rest.

Clearly this is a great piece of invective, as good as anything of the kind written in English. But one cannot avoid the question, was it worth writing? Whatever Hervey may have been (and he was by no means as silly or as bad as Pope makes him) he was not worth such an effort of genius. Why should one use an enormously expensive machine to break an egg? Or, as Pope himself asks, 'Who breaks a butterfly upon a wheel?'

Happily Pope's reputation as a satirist does not depend entirely on the sort of personal attacks we have been talking about. He was also the author of *The Rape of the Lock* (see page 34), a poem which most people would accept as a true masterpiece of light satire—satire, that is to say, which is amusing and good-tempered yet not without an element of serious social criticism. The society we are shown—rich, fashionable and idle—was the smart London society of Pope's time, with the Court at its centre. By writing about it in the elaborate style of the classical epic he reduces it to absurdity. For example the hours spent by the heroine, Belinda, at her dressing-table are compared to the sort of language used by the Roman poet Vergil to describe heroes preparing for battle. First she offers a prayer to the 'gods', then, assisted by Betty her maid, she puts on her

Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
 Puffs, powders, patches, Bibles, billet-doux.
 Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms;
 The fair each moment rises in her charms,
 Repairs her smiles, awakens every grace,
 And calls forth all the wonders of her face:
 Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,
 And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.

The absence of what would now be called a sense of moral values in the society Pope describes is nicely suggested in the equating of puffs, powders, patches and billet-doux with Bibles. This is a favourite trick with Pope, and always an amusing one. Here for example he refers to the Fates planning the events in the day of a fashionable young woman:

Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,
 Or some frail china-jar receive a flaw;
 Or stain her honour or a new brocade,
 Forget her prayers, or miss a masquerade;
 Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball . . .

And here is Belinda's anger when the impudent 'Baron' has cut off the lock of hair which gives the poem its title:

Then flashed the living lightning from her eyes,
 And screams of horror rend th'affrighted skies.
 Not louder screams to pitying heaven are cast
 When husbands or when lapdogs breathe their last.

The satire in *The Rape of the Lock* is above all cool, witty and detached, so that one sometimes wishes Pope would be *angrier* about the trivial society he describes. Anger alone however is not enough to make good satire, any more than love alone is enough to make a good love poem. It could be argued that a single couplet cleverly composed and neatly placed can be more powerful than whole pages of wear-
 invective, as when Pope describes Belinda's afternoon: of, arend",
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Meanwhile, declining from the noon of day,
 The sun obliquely shoots his burning ray;
The hungry judges soon the sentence sign,
And wretches hang that jury-men may dine.

Not often has the heartlessness of an unjust and unequal society been so neatly and so powerfully expressed.

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) was a friend of Pope, and a member with him of the Scriblerus Club. This was a small group of writers who enjoyed satirising other intellectuals of the time, and who had invented an entirely imaginary German scholar, Martinus Scriblerus, under whose name some of their work was published. Swift, born and educated in Ireland, spent some of his early life in England, where he had contacts in both the literary and the political worlds. He entered the Church, and eventually became Dean of St Patrick's cathedral in Dublin. Swift's extraordinary life and character are of absorbing interest. Much has been written about his strange love affairs with the women known as Stella and Vanessa, and the madness which darkened the end of his life. In these pages however we can only consider Swift as a satirist—probably the greatest of all satirists to have written in English.

Swift's satirical writing, whether in prose or in verse, is inspired by what seems to be a general hatred of mankind. Yet he was known in life for his kindness to his friends, and his untiring and unselfish work for the sick and poor people of Ireland. It was no doubt their sufferings and his own frustrations which caused him to see the world as a place ruled by criminal lunatics—a place which must inspire horror and hate in the mind of any honest man. Fortunately Swift's moral indignation was equalled by his wit and inventiveness: he was able to tell the most ridiculous stories and make the most outrageous jokes while appearing utterly serious. In 1729 for example, angered by the failure of the English government to help the Irish peasants who were literally dying of hunger, he published the famous *Modest Proposal*. Its full title was *A Modest Proposal for preventing the Children of Poor People from being a Burden to their Parents, or Country and for making them Beneficial to the Public*. In this grimly ironical essay he describes, with every appearance of seriousness, how Irish babies, instead of being allowed simply to die of hunger, might be killed by the butchers and elegantly served at the dinner-tables of the English gentry. Some people of course really believed that Swift meant what he said. The same people had believed, three years earlier, that a book called *Gulliver's Travels* had really been written by Captain Lemuel Gulliver, and indeed it was a true account of his adventures. *Gulliver's Travels* (surely the most famous of all satires) is the only work of Swift's which we can discuss in any detail here. Published under the real author's name) in 1726, it contains Captain Gulliver's account of four separate voyages: first to Lilliput, then to Brobdingnag, Laputa and the land of the Houyhnhnms. By a piece of irony which

Swift himself would certainly have appreciated, this, one of the most powerful attacks ever made against man's wickedness and stupidity, is now thought of by most people as a charming fairy tale for young children. It is quite possible indeed to read the first two books, without realising their meaning, as an enjoyable bit of eighteenth-century science fiction.

The character of Gulliver himself is one of Swift's cleverest inventions: a decent, practical, patriotic Englishman of his time, yet somehow at the same time stupid, credulous and (as his name suggests) gullible (easily deceived). Wherever he goes he is always eager to show his devotion to his own country, and his willingness to bring benefits of civilisation to other less enlightened peoples. For instance in the fourth voyage (to the country of the Houyhnhnms, a highly civilised race of horses who keep some dirty domestic animals called Yahoos, which bear strange resemblances to human beings) he is surprised at his host's ignorance of the art of war as practised in 'civilised' countries:

I could not forbear shaking my head, and smiling a little at his ignorance. And, being no stranger to the art of war, I gave him a description of cannon, culverins, muskets, carbines, pistols, bullets, powder, swords, bayonets, battles, sieges, retreats, attacks, undermines, countermines, bombardments, sea-fights; ships sunk with a thousand men, twenty thousand killed on each side; dying groans, limbs flying in the air; smoke, noise, confusion, trampling to death under horses' feet; flight, pursuit, victory; fields strewn with carcases left for food to dogs and wolves, and birds of prey; plundering, stripping, ravishing, burning and destroying. And, to set forth the valour of my own dear countrymen, I assured him that I had seen them blow up a hundred enemies at once in a siege, and as many in a ship; and beheld the dead bodies come down in pieces from the clouds to the great diversion of the spectators.

The Houyhnhnms were horrified that 'a creature pretending to reason could be capable of such enormities', but Gulliver continues, quite unashamed, to describe the glories of European civilisation and to offer help and guidance to the astonished Houyhnhnms. Brobdingnag too Gulliver had described with pride the glories of his fellow Europeans, and was deeply shocked when the king picked him up and stroking him gently, said:

'As for yourself, who have spent the greatest part of your life

in travelling, I am well disposed to hope you may hitherto have escaped many vices of your country. But, by what I have gathered from your own relation . . . I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.'

Nothing if not patriotic, Gulliver thought more than once that it was his duty as an Englishman to colonise the lands he visited; but:

as those countries which I have described do not appear to have any desire of being conquered and enslaved, murdered, or driven out by colonies; nor abound either in gold, silver, sugar, or tobacco; I did humbly conceive they were by no means proper objects of our zeal, our valour, or our interest.

The character of this self-satisfied traveller is the key to the whole book.

Swift's inventive genius is seen equally in his descriptions of the countries Gulliver visited. 'When we have once thought of big men and little men' (said Dr Johnson, who was no admirer of Swift) 'it is easy to do the rest': but few readers would agree with him. It was not only a question of thinking of 'big men and little men' but of inventing many incidents, amusing in themselves yet capable of carrying satirical meaning. In Lilliput for example the age-old argument between the Bigendian and Littlendian parties concerning the proper method of breaking an egg reminds us of equally silly party and religious disputes in our own time. In Laputa (the third voyage) the activities of the learned 'projectors' in the Academy of Lagado (which Swift probably intended—quite unfairly—as a caricature of the Royal Society) remind us of the doubtful value of much of what passes as science. Among many other learned men there was one who was working on a plan to improve agriculture by cutting out the labour of ploughing:

The method is this: in an acre of ground you bury, at six inches distance and eight deep, a quantity of acorns, dates, chestnuts, and other mast or vegetables whereof these animals (pigs) are fond; then you drive six hundred or more of them into the field; and in a few days, they will root up the whole ground and bring it to the surface of their food and make it fit for sowing; . . . it is true, in the first experiment, they found the charge and trouble very great, and they had little or no crop. However, it is not doubted that this invention may be capable of great improvement.

Even the proper names in *Gulliver* demonstrate Swift's wit: Flimnap, for instance, the Chief Minister of Lilliput, and his colleague Bolgolam; Glumdaleclitch, the Brobdingnagian peasant girl who took care of Gulliver and carried him to the capital, Lorbrulgrud; Glubbdubdrib, which was part of the Laputian empire; and of course Yahoo, the name of the savage and filthy animals in the country of the Houyhnhnms.

Almost every later satirist has been influenced by Swift. Negative utopias modelled on *Gulliver's Travels* have included many which are now forgotten, as well as important books like *Erewhon*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But no other English writer had observed the nastiness of mankind with such disgust, or attacked it with such anger. His whole life was a literary battle against wickedness and stupidity. Only in death could he lie (in the words of the epitaph which he himself composed for his tomb in St Patrick's cathedral in Dublin) *ubi saeva indignatio ulterius cor lacerare nequit* (where fierce indignation can no longer tear the heart).

Swift was in almost every respect a tragic figure. Thomas Love Peacock (1785–1866) appears as the exact opposite. He had a happy life during which he became a close friend of Shelley and an acquaintance of many other important writers of the time. The spirit of his satire is more like that of Chaucer than of Swift: however much he might laugh at, or complain of, the foolishness of human beings he could never really hate them. No one would claim that Peacock is one of the great names of English literature; but he was an original and entertaining writer particularly important as the satirist of the English romantic period.

Peacock grew up in the air of romantic revival. Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron were the leading poets of his early years, while the novelists were Walter Scott, Jane Austen and (a little earlier) Mrs Radcliffe and 'Monk' Lewis. The last two had developed what is called 'the novel of terror', following in the footsteps of Horace Walpole who had published *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. This is not the place for a description of romanticism, but there were three things in the romantic view of life which Peacock thought absurd when carried to extremes. The first, found particularly in Coleridge and Wordsworth, was the rather vague philosophical idea of pantheism, which may be described shortly as the belief that God and the world are the same, and that the poet and the thinker should absorb their inspiration from Nature. The second, perhaps best illustrated by Radcliffe and Scott, was an exaggerated love of the medieval supernatural, leading sometimes to such fancies as the 'Gothic' ruins (Gothic is a medieval style of architecture) to impart the picturesque quality of a landscape, or the building of imitation

castles and abbeys, like Scott's own mansion of Abbotsford in Scotland. The third was that 'passion for reforming the world' which Peacock noticed in his more 'progressive' contemporaries, Shelley and philosophers like Godwin, Bentham and J. S. Mill. In fairness to the people he satirised it must be said that Peacock was in some ways old-fashioned and reactionary in his views; more often however he put on a disguise of extreme conservatism so that he could more easily make fun of the excesses of reformers with whom he was largely in sympathy. To Shelley for instance he was a close and valued friend; but this did not blind him to the silliness into which the poet's beliefs sometimes led him.

Peacock wrote his satire in the form of novels; but his novels are very different from what is usually understood by the word. With two exceptions (*Maid Marian* and *The Misfortunes of Elphin*) they are descriptions of rather strange country-house parties, their titles being in each case the name of the house in question: *Headlong Hall*, *Crotchet Castle*, *Nightmare Abbey*, *Gryll Grange* and *Melincourt*. There is little 'story': in each case the owner of the house invites a party of friends to stay with him, and they argue and discuss all through the book, with intervals for eating, drinking and love affairs. Each book has its clergyman and each clergyman (Dr Gaster, the Reverend Mr Larynx, Dr Opimian and Dr Folliot) loves his food, his wine and his quotations from Greek and Latin authors. Scott appears as Mr Chainmail, the medievalist who lives in an imitation castle, dresses his servants in armour and feeds them with oxen roasted whole over enormous bonfires. Byron is Mr Cypress who cultivates romantic melancholy and quarrels with his wife. Coleridge is the philosopher, Mr Flosky, whose philosophy is transcendental—not based on experience but on intuition; or the equally obscure Mr Panscope. Shelley is Scythrop Glowry, with his 'passion for reforming the world' and his inability to choose between the two charming young ladies who are in love with him.

As Peacock is a writer who may be unknown to the reader I would suggest that the best introduction to him would be a reading of *The Misfortunes of Elphin*. This novel is in many ways the most charming and the most typical of all his books, and I propose to say more about it in a chapter on comedy. It shows Peacock as a romantic in spite of his satire, but it also shows his humour at its best. It cannot however be described as a satire, and for that reason any further discussion of it in this chapter would be out of place. Having read it (as I have hoped) discovered something of the special 'flavour' which Peacock gives to his novels, one should go on to *Nightmare Abbey*, which is the best of his satires.

Nightmare Abbey, 'a venerable family mansion in a highly picturesque state of semi-dilapidation', was the home of a rather melancholy old gentleman, Christopher Glowry Esq. Here he lived (Mrs Glowry being conveniently dead) with his son Scythrop, and the usual large number of domestic servants. These were chosen

by one of two criterions—a long face or a dismal name. His butler was Raven; his steward was Crow; his valet was Skellet... His grooms were Mattocks and Graves. On one occasion, being in want of a footman, he received a letter from a person signing himself Diggory Deathshead, and lost no time in securing this acquisition; but on Diggory's arrival Mr Glowry was horror-struck at the sight of a round, ruddy face, and a pair of laughing eyes. . .

By various chances a beautiful but tragic young lady, Miss Celinda Toobad, arrives at Nightmare Abbey running away from a cruel father, who had first sent her to be educated in a German convent, and then arranged for her to marry a man she had never seen. Unknown to the rest of the household, Scythrop conceals the lovely 'refugee' in a secret room, takes food to her, engages her in long philosophical discussions, and finally falls in love with her. Unfortunately he is already in love with Miss Marionetta O'Carroll, who is as gay and lively as Celinda is thoughtful and melancholy. So far as *Nightmare Abbey* has any plot, it is concerned with the solution of this triangle: indeed both ladies finally reject Scythrop and choose other husbands. Scythrop plans suicide, but wisely changes his mind; and the story ends with his very sensible order to Raven, the butler, 'Bring some Madeira'. From this bare outline of the story, which is coloured by ghostly presences, sliding panels, wine drunk from skulls and all the other features of what was called Gothic romance, it will be seen that Peacock was satirising, among other things, one of the literary fashions of the day. Jane Austen had made gentle fun of the same fashions in *Northanger Abbey*.

Chief among the guests at Nightmare Abbey is the philosopher, Mr Flosky, who, as I have said, represents Coleridge. We know Coleridge as the author of *Kubla Khan* and *The Ancient Mariner*, but most of his great intellectual energy was used (or, as some of ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~were~~ ^{are} ~~and~~ th thought, wasted) in the study of philosophy and especially of the German philosopher, Kant (1724-1804). Kant is an extreme writer, and even professional philosophers do not always understand him. Whether Coleridge understood him or not is a question I cannot answer, but in trying to spread Kant's teaching he certainly made

himself incomprehensible to most of his readers. Coleridge had been one of many intellectuals who had welcomed the French Revolution as offering new hope and new freedom to mankind, but (like his friend Wordsworth) he had soon changed his mind. Here is part of Peacock's description of Mr Flosky-Coleridge:

He had been in his youth an enthusiast for liberty, and had hailed the dawn of the French Revolution as the promise of a day that was to banish war and slavery, and every form of vice and misery from the face of the earth. Because all this was not done, he deduced that nothing was done; and from this deduction, according to his system of logic, he drew a conclusion that worse than nothing was done; that the overthrow of the feudal fortresses of tyranny and superstition was the greatest calamity that had ever befallen mankind; and that their only hope now was to rake the rubbish together, and rebuild it without any of those loopholes by which the light had originally crept in. To qualify himself for a coadjutor in this laudable task, he plunged into the central opacity of Kantian metaphysics, and lay *perdu* several years in transcendental darkness, till the common daylight of common sense became intolerable to his eyes.

There is an amusing chapter in which Marionetta, puzzled by the apparent 'cooling off' of Scythrop's love for her, seeks Mr Flosky's advice. This he gives willingly and at great length, but unfortunately poor Marionetta finds it completely incomprehensible. In the end she loses patience, and says, 'Will you oblige me, Mr Flosky, by giving me a plain answer to a plain question?' 'It is impossible, my dear Miss O'Carroll. I never gave a plain answer to a plain question in my life,' replies Mr Flosky.

Peacock's eldest daughter married the novelist George Meredith (1828-1909) who said that a satirist was 'a moral agent, often a social scavenger, working on a storage of bile'. If this were true Peacock would be no more a satirist than Chaucer, for there is no 'bile' in him, no fierce indignation, only a clear eye for human silliness, softened by kindness, tolerance and humour. Meredith's words are probably true of the really great satirists, but paradoxically it can sometimes be said that a great satirist like Juvenal or Swift is less effective than a writer like Peacock. Hate and contempt are emotions which easily carry a man away, and once the satirist loses control he loses the sympathy of his readers also, and makes himself, not his victims, appear hateful. A scream of anger or hate is certainly not satire; a smile or a joke often is. For this reason there

may be many readers who, unable to accept much of the satire of Pope or Swift, will find Peacock a most amusing and agreeable companion.

The position of Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) in the twentieth century is in some ways similar to that of Peacock in the nineteenth. Both men look with some amusement at the foolishness and wickedness of their times; both paint pictures—comic or despairing—of characters who are, or who might be, the intellectual leaders of those times. If we find in some of Huxley's satire an almost Swiftian disgust which is absent from Peacock's, it is perhaps because Huxley's world included two great wars, a Europe threatened by dictators, mass torture and execution, the starvation of millions of children, and many other horrors which would have seemed impossible in the comparatively reasonable world of Peacock's time.

In his earliest novels, *Crome Yellow* and *Antic Hay*, Huxley was consciously imitating Peacock in his use of 'the novel of talk'. Indeed the former is set in a country house not so very different from *Nightmare Abbey* or *Headlong Hall*, and includes, in the person of Mr Bodiham, a comic clergyman very much like Peacock's comic clergymen. In *Point Counter Point* (1928) Huxley enlarged the Peacockian novel of talk to include not only some violent action but also much real human feeling. Anyone who thinks of Huxley as a dry intellectual should read the tragic description of little Philip Quarles's sickness and death in Chapter 35. *Point Counter Point*, thought by many readers to be the cleverest satirical novel of this century, gives a fascinating picture of certain ideas and people of the 1920s. They belong, like Huxley himself, to the rich upper middle class. If they have not actually been educated, as their creator was, at the smartest public school (Eton) and the most fashionable Oxford College (Balliol), they are almost unbelievably 'cultured', and the lives they lead are comfortable enough. It would be foolish to object to this, just as it would be foolish to object that much modern literature and drama deals only with the working class.

The central figure in *Point Counter Point* is Philip Quarles, a novelist not unlike Huxley himself. Others are clearly recognisable portraits: Mark Rampion of D. H. Lawrence for example and Burlap of the journalist and critic Middleton Murry. Other characters of the time who appear in various disguises are the painter Augustus of Waverley, the short-story writer Katherine Mansfield (who married one of the Murrys); and the rich, immoral and idle 'bright young woman' (the Murry); and the rich, disguised under the name of Lucy Tantamount. There is an extremely interesting account of an imaginary fascist movement known as the British Freeman and its leader, Everard Webley. In this

Huxley seems almost to have looked into the future and foreseen the rise of Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists in the 1930s. *Point Counter Point* is by no means an easy book for the reader whose native language is not English, but it is an important one in the history of modern literature. It was important too in Huxley's own development as a writer and thinker because it made clear his great admiration for D. H. Lawrence (Rampion is the only truly likeable character in the book); Huxley himself was above all an intellectual, but his friendship with Lawrence taught him not to overvalue the intellect as against the emotions.

Brave New World (published in 1932) is the most popular of all Huxley's books. It has the attraction of science fiction added to serious discussion of problems which seem far more immediate now than they did forty years ago when the book was written. As a 'negative-utopian' view of the future, *Brave New World* is indeed frightening; the more so because so much of what the author foresaw has already happened, or is about to happen: the fertilisation of human eggs in laboratories; the placing of human beings in classes according to their intelligence; the smiling omnipotence of 'controllers' like Mustapha Mond; the destruction of religion; the use of sexual 'freedom' to drug people into accepting the absence of other, and more important, freedoms—all these Huxley predicted forty years ago. Regardless of his warnings, and those of other intelligent people, civilisation continued its technological advance (Peacock had often referred ironically to the 'march of progress'), and not until now, almost ten years after Huxley's death, have we started to realise the dangers that threaten us. *Brave New World* is so well known that there is no need for me to say more about it here. Instead I shall describe another, less well known, of Huxley's satirical novels. Readers who have not read *Brave New World* however should be reminded that the book cannot be properly understood without some knowledge of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, from which Huxley borrowed very much more than his title (from Miranda's comment on the first human beings, apart from her father, she had ever known):

O, wonder!

How many goodly creatures are there here!

How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,

That has such people in't!

I have chosen *After Many a Summer* (1939) for more detailed description because it is less well known than *Brave New World*, yet is in some

respects a better novel. Like *Point Counter Point* it is a mixture of satire and philosophical discussion, held together by a good story which might be described as a horror thriller. Unlike the earlier novel however its characters are not (as far as I know) intended as portraits or caricatures of particular people.

The chief character, through whose eyes we see most of the story, is an English literary man named Jeremy Pordage. He is invited to California by an American millionaire, Jo Stoyte, who has recently bought a great quantity of historical papers and documents from two old ladies in England—believed to be the only remaining members of the old and noble English family of Hauberk. From Los Angeles Jeremy is taken in Mr Stoyte's enormous car to the fantastic Gothic castle in which the millionaire lives with his army of servants; his personal physician, Dr Obispo; and his mistress Virginia, a beautiful young woman, oversexed and with little intelligence, who is carrying on an affair with Dr Obispo.

On the way to the castle Stoyte's negro chauffeur drives through Hollywood and points out the houses of the 'stars' of that time: Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford. He also shows Jeremy the 'Beverly Pantheon'—the magnificent and very expensive cemetery from which Jo Stoyte has made most of his money. Huxley clearly enjoys describing this extraordinary place (which, by the way, probably gave Evelyn Waugh the idea for his novel *The Loved One*, which also satirises the American funeral industry):

An hour later, they were on their way again, having seen everything. Everything. The sloping lawns, like a green oasis in the mountain desolation. The groves of trees. The tombstones in the grass. The Pets' Cemetery, with its marble group after Landseer's 'Dignity and Impudence'. The tiny Church of the Poet—a miniature reproduction of Holy Trinity at Stratford-on-Avon complete with Shakespeare's tomb and a twenty-four-hour service of organ music played automatically by the Perpetual Wurlitzer and broadcast by concealed loudspeakers all over the cemetery.

Then, leading out of the vestry, the Bride's Apartment (for one was married at the Tiny Church as well as buried from it)—the Bride's Apartment that had just been redecorated by a chauffeur, in the style of Norma Shearer's boudoir of *Antoinette*. And, next to the Bride's Apartment, the black marble Vestibule of Ashes, leading to the Crematorium where three super-modern oil-burning mortuary furnaces were always under heat and ready for any emergency.

Accompanied wherever they went by the tremolos of the Perpetual Wurlitzer, they had driven next to look at the Tower of Resurrection—from the outside only; for it housed the executive offices of the West Coast Cemeteries Corporation. Then the Children's Corner with its statues of Peter Pan and the Infant Jesus, its groups of alabaster babies playing with bronze rabbits, its lily pool and an apparatus labelled The Fountain of Rainbow Music, from which there spouted simultaneously water, coloured lights and the inescapable strains of the Perpetual Wurlitzer. Then, in rapid succession, the Garden of Quiet, the 'Tiny Taj Mahal, the Old World Mortuary. And, reserved by the chauffeur to the last, as the final and crowning proof of his employer's glory, the Pantheon itself.

Having arrived at Stoyte's castle, Jeremy Pordage settles down to work on the Hauberk Papers, which fill several large boxes. He has many conversations with Dr Obispo who, with his young assistant Pete, is doing research into possible ways of prolonging human life. The research is naturally paid for by Stoyte who, at the age of sixty is becoming more and more afraid of death. One day Pordage finds among the Hauberk Papers the diary of an eighteenth-century member of the family, the Fifth Earl of Gonister. From this it appears that the Earl too had been interested in prolonging human life, and had discovered that it could be done by eating the liver of carp—fish which are known to live for as long as two hundred years. Pordage and Dr Obispo are extremely excited by this discovery, and decide to go to England in the hope of getting more knowledge about the Fifth Earl. About this time however there is a tragedy in the castle.

Young Pete, Obispo's assistant, has fallen in love with Virginia. As the lady is already very busy with her affair with Obispo and her obligations to the millionaire, she has no time for Pete, and insists that they remain 'just good friends'. Stoyte however, believing that Pete, not Obispo, is Virginia's secret lover, shoots the young man. Dr Obispo certifies that the death has been caused by heart failure, and persuades Stoyte and Virginia to go to England with him and Jeremy Pordage. The story ends with a dramatic and horrible scene in which the four of them find the fifth Earl of Gonister, still alive after two hundred years, in an underground room at the family mansion in Surrey. With him is another ape-like creature, apparently of similar age. The two of them fight and make noises, watched in fascinated horror by three of the visitors from the world above. Only Dr Obispo is unshaken. Indeed he seems to regard the creatures with amusement rather than disgust:

from one of Mr Propter's conversations with Jeremy Pordage and the young scientist, Pete, who is worried because his research work has to be paid for with Jo Stoyte's money:

'All money's pretty dirty,' said Mr Propter. 'I don't know that poor Jo's is appreciably dirtier than anyone else's. You may think it is; but that's only because, for the first time, you're seeing money at its source—its personal, human source. You're like one of these city children who have been used to getting their milk in sterilised bottles from a shiny white delivery wagon. When they go into the country and see it being pumped out of a big, fat, smelly old animal, they're horrified, they're disgusted. It's the same with money. You've been used to getting it from behind a bronze grating in a magnificent marble bank. Now you've come out into the country and are living in the cowshed with the animal that actually secretes the stuff. And the process doesn't strike you as very savoury or hygienic. But the same process was going on, even when you didn't know about it. And if you weren't working for Jo Stoyte, you'd probably be working for some college or university. But where do colleges and universities get their money from? From rich men. In other words, from people like Jo Stoyte. Again it's dirt served out in sterile containers—by a gentleman in a cap and gown this time.'

'So you figure it's all right for me to go on like I am now?' said Pete.

'All right', Mr Propter answered, 'in the sense that it's not conspicuously worse than anything else.'

Huxley's strength as a satirist lies in the fact that he is also a true novelist—a novelist, that is to say, who writes about real people in real human situations. Even in his most purely satirical book, *Brave New World*, we feel that Bernard Marx and John 'the Savage' are human beings: indeed it is the contrast between their humanity and the inhumanity of the world in which they find themselves that gives the satire its point.

George Orwell (1903-50) we are not dealing with a great novelist but with a writer who was primarily a journalist and essayist. And his guise, as he did in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to use the form of the writer of one of his most important books, it was not because he was interested in the true novelist's field of human character and human relations, but because he wanted to express his fears about totalitarian politics in the most readable and effective way. He was

indeed a propagandist (in the best sense of the word) and not a novelist at all. We shall return to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in a minute, but first let us look at Orwell in a more general way.

Eric Blair, who later became known by the pen name of George Orwell, was born in India, where his father was a minor official in the Indian customs. Like Huxley, though some ten years later, he went to school at Eton. He was however a scholarship boy, and consciousness of his own comparative poverty seems to have made him unhappy as well as encouraging his left-wing political opinions. These were strengthened by the five years he spent in Burma in the Indian Imperial Police Force, from which he resigned in 1927. Returning to Europe he lived for the next few years in Paris and London—a period of his life which he describes in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). In 1936 he went to Spain and fought on the side of the socialist government in the Civil War. He was wounded, and returned to England bitterly disillusioned both by Franco's victory and by what he had seen of the muddle and corruption on the socialist side. He continued to believe in social democracy, but no longer had much confidence in any party. Indeed it was now clear to him that there was little to choose between fascist dictatorship on the one hand, and communist dictatorship on the other. During the Second World War he became well known as a journalist and essayist, but it was not until 1945 that he won almost world-wide fame with *Animal Farm*. This little book (which Orwell described in a sub-title as *A Fairy Story*) must be considered one of the great satirical works of the twentieth century. It is too well known to need any description here. Its strength lies in its very simplicity—a reminder that the most effective satire is often (like *Gulliver's Travels* and some of the fairy stories of Hans Andersen) so cleverly ironic that less intelligent readers imagine it to be childish.

Orwell's last work, which I shall describe in a little more detail for the benefit of those who have not yet read it, was *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (published in 1949). Unfortunately Orwell did not live to see the success of the television and film versions of this frightening piece of satire—a negative utopia intended as a warning that no modern society (not even an English-speaking one!) can afford to shut its eyes to the dangers of totalitarianism. It is interesting to note that Anthony A. Thompson's book on totalitarianism in Britain and America not only has the title *Big Brother in Britain* but also quotes a remark by Orwell himself, explaining why *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is set in England, and not in Germany or Russia. He emphasises that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere.

1984 is the year in which Orwell's story is set. By that time the world is divided between three great powers, Eurasia, Eastasia and Oceania. England is a part of Oceania, and has been renamed Airstrip One. Everything in Oceania is controlled by the Party, and the Party is personified in the figure of Big Brother. No one is certain whether or not Big Brother actually exists, but enormous portraits of him look down from every wall, with the reminder 'Big Brother Is Watching You'. Society is divided into Party Members, who wear blue overalls and do all the intellectual work, and Proles, who do the physical work. Unlike Huxley's Gammas in *Brave New World*, the Proles are ordinary human beings not very different from the working classes today, but they are not allowed or expected to have any democratic power, or to take any interest in political affairs. They are told what to think by the Ministry of Truth, and controlled by the Thought Police and the Ministry of Love:

They were born, they grew up in the gutters, they went to work at twelve, they passed through a brief blossoming-period of beauty and sexual desire, they married at twenty, they were middle-aged at thirty, they died, for the most part, at sixty. Heavy physical work, the care of home and children, petty quarrels with neighbours, films, football, beer, and, above all gambling, filled up the horizon of their minds.

It was not difficult to control the Proles; indeed there was no need to control them because they offered no possible threat to the Party's power:

In all questions of morals they were allowed to follow their ancestral code. The sexual puritanism of the Party was not imposed upon them. Promiscuity went unpunished, divorce was permitted. For that matter, even religious worship would have been permitted if the proles had shown any sign of needing or wanting it. They were beneath suspicion. As the Party slogan put it: 'Proles and animals are free.'

Party members were much less free: indeed their thought was controlled by the Thought Police, and any breaking away from the principles of Ingsoc ('English Socialism') might result in the disappearance of the 'thought-criminal'. In other words he would disappear, as opponents of Stalin often did in Russia. The hero of the book, Winston Smith, actually escaped vaporisation, as we shall see, but the price he paid was a heavy one. The most

important principle of Ingsoc was that truth and history could be changed at the wish of the Party:

The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon. And since the Party is in full control of all records, and equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it.

So it was believed by everybody that English people in the 1960s were the slaves of evil men called capitalists; that children worked twelve hours a day in coal-mines and factories; that families were so poor that they had no shoes for their feet; and that every capitalist had the right to sleep with any of the women who worked in his factories. All this had of course been changed by the Ingsoc Revolution. People had learned the philosophy of Doublethink 'the power of holding two contradictory ideas in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them'. They were also learning the new language, Newspeak, which it was hoped would entirely replace Oldspeak (ordinary modern English) by the year 2050.

'The purpose of Newspeak...' [wrote Orwell in an amusingly detailed 'Appendix' to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*] 'was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words.'

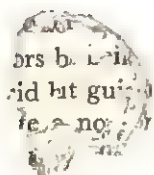
It must be admitted that Newspeak could have a certain attraction for those who find English difficult to learn: for example every word could be made negative by the prefix 'un' or strengthened by the prefixes 'plus' or 'double plus'. So the word 'warm' was unnecessary, one simply said 'uncold'. 'Very cold' became 'pluscold', and 'extremely cold' became 'double pluscold'.

Orwell's Airstrip One is described in as much detail as *Attila*, *Laputa* or Butler's *Erewhon*. But the story of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is quite simple, and extremely frightening. Winston Smith, a good Party member, finds himself troubled by memories of the past, by doubts about Big Brother and the whole philosophy of Ingsoc. To make matters worse he has a love affair with another Party member, Julia. The two of them therefore are guilty of both 'thoughtcrime'

and 'sexcrime'. They are arrested by the Thought Police, and Part Three of the book describes in terrifying detail how Winston is interrogated by Party agents. At first he is able to resist, but in the end he is taken to the terrible Room 101, where he has to face 'the worse thing in the world'. I shall not tell the reader what this was because I hope he will read the book for himself. Winston's resistance breaks, and he finds himself doing the one thing he had vowed never to do: betraying Julia,

...he was shouting frantically, over and over. 'Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her. Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me!

Reading the work of satirists, and especially of modern satirists like Huxley and Orwell, we are reminded of something which I mentioned in Chapter I, namely the fact that literature often (though not always) has a *moral* purpose. It is possible to read *Brave New World* or *Animal Farm* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* simply for entertainment. Indeed that is how we generally do read such books. Beyond mere entertainment however is the moral effect they have upon millions of readers. After reading them we can never again shut our eyes to the dangers which threaten the modern world. A great satire can often do more practical good than a hundred speeches by good democratic politicians, or a thousand sermons by well-meaning preachers.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Comedy: The Light and the Dark

In ordinary conversational English the words comedy and comic are used for anything that is funny or laughable. An uneducated person who goes to the theatre to see (for example) Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, which is described as a comedy, may reasonably complain that it is not funny at all, and that the money he has paid in expectation of a good laugh has been wasted. He would be even more disappointed by the absence of good laughs in Dante's *Divina Commedia*. The truth is of course that we use the word comedy in different and confusing ways. When we speak of a comedy we generally mean a play which has a pleasant atmosphere and a happy ending. It may not actually make us laugh, but it must at least be amusing or entertaining—perhaps even satirical, for it is clear that satire and comedy are closely related. Comedy in the more general or abstract sense however is found in other forms of literature. It is found for example in much of Chaucer's poetry; it is found in works as different as those of Dickens and P. G. Wodehouse (born 1881); it is found, happily for all of us, in the events of everyday life.

In this chapter I want to use the word in both senses. I shall not only try to point out some of the important features of English stage comedy from medieval times to the London theatre of the 1970s but also to say something about comedy in poetry and the novel. First however let us think a little about the nature of comedy in the very widest sense.

Much has been written about the philosophy of laughter; yet most of us would find it hard to explain why we laugh at all. What we do find is that certain people and certain situations always seem funny. Mothers-in-law for example seem to have been figures of fun even in the Roman comic dramatist Terence (190-159 B.C.) wrote a play called *Hecyra* (*The Mother-in-Law*). An old man with a young wife can always be seen as a comic figure, especially if the wife makes a fool of

him by choosing a lover who is young, handsome and clever. One might think that only the most diseased mind would find anything comical in the mistakes and difficulties of a blind man, yet Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* did not hesitate to make fun of Old Gobbo's blindness. In eighteenth-century London one of the most popular amusements was to visit Bethlehem Hospital (or Bedlam, as it came to be called) in order to watch the odd behaviour of the lunatics there. It is well known that small children, especially small boys, can be extremely cruel in laughing at those who have some physical peculiarity. Most people, whether children or adults, know quite well that such laughter is unkind. The better side of their nature tells them that mothers-in-law, deceived husbands, blind men, lunatics and people with big ears are often very nice people—people who deserve sympathy rather than laughter. Laughter, it must be admitted, is often cruel; and it may be that the purpose of comedy is to supply us with imaginary objects on which to exercise our cruelty, without harming others and without shocking our own moral sense. I should feel very guilty about laughing at my poor old friend, Mr Dodder, whose young wife is having an affair with that clever journalist who writes for the Sunday newspaper, *The Observer*; but I can laugh as much as I like at the stupid old husband in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* (see page 39) without any feeling that I am behaving badly. So it may be that Aristotle's theory of *catharsis* (see page 51) applies to comedy as well as tragedy.

Another theory of laughter suggests that it is an expression of pleasure and thankfulness at one's own comparative good luck. To laugh at a very fat woman is to express one's own satisfaction at not being a very fat woman. There is, as the French writer and novelist, La Rochefoucauld, said, something not displeasing in the misfortunes of our best friends. If we laugh at such misfortunes it is because we ourselves are happy to be free of them. I do not wish to say that laughter is always and necessarily cruel or selfish: in English we sometimes make a distinction between laughing *at* somebody and laughing *with* somebody. The really great comic characters in literature—Cervantes's Don Quixote, Shakespeare's Falstaff, Dickens's Mr Pickwick—are basically lovable: we may laugh *at* them, but we also laugh *with* them. Generally however we must agree with Lady Sneerwell in Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* that 'there's no possibility of being witty without a little innuendo...'

The history of comedy would have to begin with the ancient Greek *komos* (no level), and the satyr plays which, in classical times, were performed as a kind of comic relief immediately following the performance of a tragic trilogy (see page 50). Out of these grew the comedy of Aristophanes (448-380 B.C.), generally satirical in tone, and

still very much alive when performed in translation today. Menander (340-292 B.C.) developed the so-called New Comedy, which was imitated by the Latin dramatists Plautus (254-184 B.C.) and Terence (190-159 B.C.), and which resembled what was called the Comedy of Manners some eighteen centuries later. The true origin of *English* comedy however is to be found in the mystery plays and miracle plays of the Middle Ages.

Mystery and miracle plays were based on Biblical stories or the lives of the saints. They were performed in most large towns, generally on the feast of Corpus Christi (the Thursday after what we call Trinity Sunday, hence falling generally in June). It was usual for a whole cycle of plays to be done during the day, beginning with the story of Adam and Eve, and ending with Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. The actors were members of the various trade guilds or associations, and they performed on heavy wagons known as pageants. These pageants usually had three stages, one above the other, representing Heaven, Earth and Hell. At various important points in the town there were stations, where the pageants stopped in turn, each presenting its own particular play at each station. Thus the citizen and his family, settling themselves for the day at any one station, were able to enjoy the whole cycle without moving. It happens that four practically complete cycles of mystery plays still exist—those of Chester, Coventry, York and Wakefield. We know therefore exactly what these medieval plays were like, and one of the most surprising things about them is the amount of comedy or farce which they contain. The very word farce means stuffing or padding, and was first used to describe the amusing but irrelevant characters and events which found their way into these basically religious plays.

Anyone who studies the medieval sculpture in a great Gothic cathedral will be surprised at first by the odd mixture of figures—saints and kings side by side with devils and clowns, holy ladies next to gossips and fishwives. It is the same in the miracle and mystery plays. In the York play of Noah's Flood for instance much comic relief is provided by Noah's wife, who refuses to leave her 'gossips' and go into the Ark as the waters rise. In the end she is forced in by her three sons. Noah pulls her in, saying, 'Welcome, wife, into this boat.' She replies by giving him a smart blow on the ear: 'And have thou that for thy mote!' (Mote here means speech or argument.) ^{of her} ~~her~~ favourite comic character was Mak the sheep-stealer in ^{of} ~~of~~ Wakefield Shepherds' Play. While the shepherds are lis. to the news of Christ's birth, Mak manages to steal one of their sheep. On their way to Bethlehem the shepherds call at Mak's cottage, where Mrs Mak is admiring her newly-born child in its cradle. One of them

notices that the baby's face is rather strange, and they soon find that it is in fact no baby, but the stolen sheep. The play ends with Mak being thrown about in a blanket as punishment, and the shepherds going on their way to the manger. There are many examples of similarly comic scenes occurring in plays which are otherwise deeply religious, and one cannot fail to be impressed by the happy way in which the two elements are mixed to create drama that is not only reverent, but often truly poetic.

Three of the most popular characters in the mystery plays were King Herod, the Devil and the Vice. Herod was always shown as a comically angry tyrant, his rage after learning of the escape of the Holy Family into Egypt being one of the highlights of the Christmas plays. 'Here Erode ragis in this pagond and in the strete also' says a stage direction in one of them, making it seem probable that there was a good deal of clowning and noisy behaviour between actor and audience. The Devil wore an ugly mask (in contrast to the face of God, which was generally gilded) and was given long finger-nails. He was accompanied by the Vice—a sort of lesser devil who danced around him, and pretended to threaten him with a wooden sword. It is to this that Shakespeare refers in *Twelfth Night* when he makes Feste, the clown, sing:

I am gone, sir,
And anon, sir,
I'll be with you again
In a trice,
Like to the old Vice,
Your need to sustain;
Who with dagger and lath,
In his rage and his wrath
Cries Ah, Ah! to the Devil
Like a mad lad,
Pare thy nails, dad;
Adieu, goodman devil.

What seems at first to be merely nonsense is in fact a clear reference to the Vice, a character which would have been known to most of Shakespeare's audience. 'Pare thy nails, dad!' is clearly a popular joke about the long-nailed Devil. The Vice was to play a long and important part in the history of European comedy. He reappears in England as the Shakespearean clown—often a clever amusing commentator on the other actors and events in the play.

To offer a history of English comedy, even in the barest outline, would be impossible in a single chapter. Instead I shall describe the five chief types of comedy which have generally been recognised by historians and critics, and mention a few examples of each. This means that we shall not be able to look at our subject in strict chronological order. This is probably a good thing since this is not a book of literary history, but a book about living literature, and the comedies of Charles II's time (or even of Aristophanes's time) are no more and no less living than the best comedies on the London stage of the 1970s. The five types I refer to are 'romantic comedy', the 'comedy of humours', the 'comedy of manners', 'sentimental comedy', and what is called 'black' or 'dark' comedy.

Romantic comedy is the most popular of all forms of entertainment. Perhaps the best way of describing it is to mention five highly successful examples produced during the last four hundred years: Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (about 1600), Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913) and Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit* (1941). These are all very different plays, but they have one thing in common, namely a pleasant mixture of love and laughter. Since (we are told) it is love and laughter that make the world go round, the popularity of romantic comedy is not difficult to explain.

The earliest English romantic comedy is probably *Ralph Roister Doister*, written by a headmaster of Westminster School and first acted by the boys there in about 1554. The author, Nicholas Udall, was consciously imitating Plautus and Terence. Some twelve years later another famous comedy, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, was produced at Christ's College, Cambridge: the authorship of this play is doubtful, but like *Roister Doister* it is farcical and has a love interest. In 1594 there appeared *The Honourable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* by Robert Greene, setting the pattern which was to be followed by most of the Elizabethan dramatists who attempted comedy, namely a pattern of farcical qualities with dialogue in prose, mixed with a theme of love and romance expressed in verse. Friar Bacon and his assistant, Friar Bungay, were magicians who made a brass head which was supposed to talk. This and other demonstrations of their magic provide plenty of good-natured foolery. The love theme is supplied by the competition between the Prince of Wales (later Edward I) and Lord Lacy for the love of fair ^M~~M~~of, ^{of}~~of~~ Margaret of Fressingfield.

It was Shakespeare who carried romantic comedy almost to perfection, especially during the period 1594-1600, with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, which are too well

known to need any description here and may well be taken as examples of romantic comedy at its best.

Comedy of this kind depends a good deal on contrast: in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for example the Theseus-Hippolyta story and the moonlight mistakes of the lovers would probably seem tedious and sentimental if it were not for the foolery of Bottom and his friends; and the latter might seem crudely farcical if not lightened by the poetry and romance of the lovers. The story of Titania and the 'changed' Bottom makes a link between the two worlds, and might well be taken as an emblem or symbol of all comedy of this kind. It is well known that Shakespeare, as a practical playwright, had to please two quite separate groups in his audience—the courtiers, students and men-about-town on the one hand, and the ordinary people, many of them quite uneducated, on the other. The educated part of the audience liked fine poetry, romance and touches of satire. The others preferred farcical humour and good-natured clowning of a kind which clever people might despise. 'This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard', says the aristocratic Hippolyta on seeing Bottom's play; and one has the impression that Shakespeare himself is apologising to the educated half of his audience. Times change however and few modern audiences, however educated, fail to enjoy the clowning. It is interesting to note that the last three of Shakespeare's comedies, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, designed for private performances rather than the public playhouse, have less farce and more poetry and romance than his earlier comedies. Indeed if we use the word in its modern sense they are scarcely comedies at all.

Other writers of romantic comedy in Shakespeare's time were Beaumont (1584-1616) and Fletcher (1579-1625) who worked together in writing a number of such plays; and Thomas Dekker (1570-1632). Dekker stressed the humorous and realistic element more than the poetic, and wrote *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, one of the liveliest of all English comedies.

The 'comedy of humours' is a phrase generally used in connection with Ben Jonson (1572-1637), who was the most influential dramatist of Shakespeare's time, though certainly not the best. Jonson had an eventful life: he had been in his young days a bricklayer and a soldier, and had once killed an actor in a duel. He was also an extremely productive writer—not only of plays, but also of masques, poetry and criticism. His comedies (which we are chiefly concerned with here) include *Every Man in his Humour*, *Every Man out of his Humour*, *The Silent Woman*, *Volpone*, *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*. Jonson's idea was that comedy should not be 'true to life' but 'larger than life'. Each character should be not so much a real man or woman as a

personification of some human passion or weakness. *For example* something of this in the introduction to *Every Man out of his Humour*:

As when some one particular quality
Doth so possess a man that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confusions, all to run one way,
This may be truly said to be a humour.

It is important that the reader should understand the special use of the word 'humour' here. It is not used in any of its modern senses, but in the sense of a dominant passion or obsession. In *Every Man in his Humour* the rich merchant Kiteley has a young and pretty wife of whom he is madly jealous: jealousy is *his* humour, the passion that rules his whole life; the young hero's father, Old Knowell, is always worried about his son's behaviour and safety: anxiety is *his* humour; Captain Bobadill is the talkative but cowardly old soldier: boastfulness is *his* humour.

In *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson shows us how the humours of various types of Londoners are taken advantage of by the hard-headed and quick-witted market-people. One man is tricked out of his money because he fancies himself as a smart leader of fashion, another because he is proud of being a clever businessman, and so on. There was in fact little that was new in the way Jonson invented his characters and constructed his plays; characters like the boastful soldier or the jealous husband were, as we have seen, at least as old as Plautus. What was new was the name 'comedy of humours', and the very questionable scientific support which Jonson found for it. He borrowed it from the beliefs of medieval doctors and scientists who thought that the human body was made up of four humours which corresponded to the four elements of the physical world—earth, air, fire and water. A man's health, and indeed his whole character, was thought to depend on the balance between the four humours in his body: thus too much of the choleric (or angry) humour (corresponding to the element of fire in nature) made a man energetic and hot-tempered; too much of the lymphatic (or watery) humour (corresponding to water in nature) made him cold and spiritless. (It is interesting to notice that in modern colloquial English we still speak of such a person as wet.) This kind of science was of course out of date even in Jonson's time, but he found it useful as a support for his theory of comedy—just as modern writers sometimes like to support their literary theories by referring to out-of-date psychology.

Jonson's importance does not of course depend on his theory of comedy, but upon his success as a comic dramatist. *Every Man in his Humour* and *Volpone*, like most of his other comedies, are still to be seen on the English stage. In some ways they are more acceptable to modern audiences than the romantic comedies of Shakespeare; and perhaps this is because we live at a time when romantic comedy in general is out of fashion. This seems clear when we compare a film comedy of the 1930-50 period with one produced during the last decade. It is not that love and laughter are out of favour but that many of us prefer comedy with a satirical tone, comedy based (as Jonson said in the introduction to *Every Man in his Humour*) on

...deeds and language such as men do use
And persons such as Comedy would choose,
When she would show an image of the times
And sport with human follies, not with crimes.

The 'comedy of manners' is a phrase often used in literary history and criticism, though its meaning is not always clear. It is particularly applied in England to the restoration dramatists, and especially Congreve (1670-1729) and Wycherley (1640-1716); but it is a type of comedy which can flourish in any civilised urban society, and we see it again in Sheridan (1751-1816) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). It makes fun not so much of individual human beings and their humours as of social groups and their fashionable manners. It is generally more or less satirical, though in a good-natured way; and critics who object to the low moral tone of much restoration comedy sometimes forget that Wycherley, in a play like *The Country Wife*, was showing the moral weakness of a particular social group, asking us to laugh at it but not necessarily to approve of it. Sheridan was doing the same in *The School for Scandal*, yet no one complains of the immoral behaviour of Lady Sneerwell and Sir Benjamin Backbite—presumably because it is not *sexually* immoral. The comedy of manners is most likely to be found in an aristocratic group like the court of Charles II in England or Louis XIV in France, or the high Society of Victorian or Edwardian days. It is a highly artificial form of drama, full of verbal wit, and sometimes inclined to be cynical and hard.

It was the hardness and cynicism of the typical restoration comedy, as well as its occasional indecency and permissiveness, which led Jeremy Collier (1650-1726) to write his *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*. Collier, a churchman and a puritan, was particularly critical of the plays of Congreve and Vanbrugh

(1664-1726). The indecency he complained of would probably seem harmless enough to theatre-goers of the 1960s and 1970s, but Collier succeeded in persuading the public that the theatre needed cleaning up. One result of this was the appearance of the new 'sentimental comedy'.

The chief writer of sentimental comedy was Sir Richard Steele (1672-1729). We shall return to him in a minute, but first it is necessary to explain that the word 'sentimental' is used here in an unusual sense. A sentimental comedy was one written with the intention of expressing *moral* sentiments. In other words it contained an element of preaching, even though the preaching was disguised as entertainment. Steele, probably best remembered as the essayist and journalist who worked with Addison to produce *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* (see page 233), agreed with Collier that the English stage needed cleaning up. Unlike Collier however he thought that the cleaning-up could best be done by writing new plays rather than by attacking the old ones. With this in mind he wrote a comedy called *The Funeral*, but neither this nor any of his other early plays was very successful. In 1722 however he produced *The Conscious Lovers*, which had some success on the stage although many people laughed at what L. J. Potts in his book *Comedy* (1949) described as 'a display of naked and immoderate virtue such as a modern audience would not endure...'. After *The Conscious Lovers* sentimental comedy ceased for some two centuries to be taken seriously. It was indeed amusingly satirised by several comic writers of the time. Readers who know Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* may remember the 'sentimental' villain, Joseph Surface, who behaves in the nastiest way, while expressing the most admirable moral sentiments.

In the present century there has been a rebirth of the sentimental comedy, but under new names and in new forms. Phrases like 'the drama of social consciousness' and 'the drama of commitment' have been used by writers and critics who felt, like Steele, that comedy should be morally instructive as well as entertaining. Thus writers as different as Wilde, Sir James Barrie, Sir Noel Coward and Sir Terence Rattigan (whose comedies have given pleasure to millions) have sometimes been criticised for being frivolous and for having no serious social purpose, whereas Shaw has been praised for using comedy as propaganda for his own opinions. The world-wide influence of the German dramatist, Brecht (1898-1956), has encouraged many writers of plays, both in England and America, to think that drama *ought* to be concerned with political and social problems, if not actually propagandist. This opinion, I think, leads to the death of true comedy, just as Steele's sentimental comedy led to the death of the

genuine (if not always moral) comedy of Wycherley, Vanbrugh and Congreve.

The four types of drama I have mentioned—romantic comedy, comedy of humours, comedy of manners and sentimental comedy—have been recognised and named by various critics at various times. Divisions of this kind are useful, but I must remind the reader again that they should not be taken too seriously. It does not really matter whether we call *She Stoops to Conquer* for example a comedy of manners or a romantic comedy or both: every work of literature or art is unique. But this does not alter the fact that divisions and classifications can be very helpful when we are looking at any of the wide fields in which man's imaginative and creative power has been active.

There are many plays which do not belong to any of the classes we have been looking at—which may not even be funny or amusing or cheerful—but which generally go under the name of comedy. Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* for example might both be called comedies, but they have very little in common with each other, and even less with plays like Sheridan's *The Rivals* or Rattigan's *French Without Tears*. Unhappy at having no ready-made name to attach to this kind of play, critics and historians have used phrases like 'tragi-comedy', 'comic tragedy' or simply 'drama' (which is sometimes used, incorrectly, to mean *serious* drama as opposed comedy). More useful, I think, are the phrases 'black comedy' and 'dark comedy'. The latter (following J. L. Styan) is the one I shall use here.

The best introduction to dark comedy can be had by reading Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*, and comparing them with the better-known romantic comedies like *The Taming of the Shrew* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The first two are cynical, bitter and (in the eyes of romantic audiences or readers) unpleasant. I have already referred to *Troilus and Cressida* in the chapter on satire (see page 151). It is not the sort of play from which one gets many 'good laughs'—though some modern producers have tried hard to make it so. Anti-heroic, anti-romantic, *Troilus* makes fun of human greatness. 'No man is a hero to his valet', as a French woman, famous for her wit, said in 1728; and none of the great men of the *Iliad*—Achilles, Hector, Ajax, Diomedes—are heroes in the eyes of Shakespeare's Thersites. As he sees it the whole story of the war over the beautiful Helen is 'such patchery, such juggling, and such knavery! All the argument is a cuckold and a whore; a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon!' *Measure for Measure*, besides being an interesting study of a man (Angelo) who would now be called a 'sexual psychopath', contains much discussion of serious

moral and intellectual problems. Both these plays are typical of the darker side of comedy—a side which is seen in many later plays which have been loosely called comedies (Molière's *Tartuffe*, Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession*), and which has been especially noticeable in the modern English theatre, to which we must now turn.

When John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* was first seen on the London stage in 1956 it became clear that a new age in the story of English drama was beginning. It no longer seemed possible to keep the old distinction between tragedy and comedy—a distinction which (as we have seen) had always been an unreal one, though convenient enough for the purposes of literary history or introductory books like this one. It would be useful if we could give a whole chapter to modern English drama, but to do so in a book of this length would perhaps give a wrong impression of its importance in English literature as a whole. Some modern playwrights have already been mentioned in Chapter III and I make no excuse for including others in a chapter on comedy, even though much of their work is far from being funny or amusing.

Osborne himself (born 1929) was an actor before he became a dramatist. He has written two historical plays (*Luther* and *A Patriot for Me*) as well as dark comedies like *Epitaph for George Dillon* (written together with Anthony Creighton), *The Entertainer* and *Inadmissible Evidence*. The importance of *Look Back in Anger* was not that it was a better play than Osborne's later works (though I personally think it was), but that it introduced a new kind of drama to the English stage. If we call it comedy we must not make the mistake of thinking that it is in any way like the comedy of Sheridan or Wilde, or the artificial 'drawing-room' comedies that have always (and rightly) been popular in the commercial theatre. The subject of *Look Back in Anger* is basically the hidden class-war between those who have grown up in comfortable *bourgeois* homes, and those who have fought their way up the social stairs by their own intelligence. Osborne shows us something of the married life of a young man of the latter type, and his wife—a girl of equal intelligence but higher social class—who is unable to understand his anger and frustration.

After *Look Back in Anger* the phrase 'angry young man' became popular as a description of writers who, like Osborne, were unhappy about the injustice and inequality which still seemed to exist in Britain despite the recent 'victory for democracy' in the Second World War. Another popular phrase was 'kitchen-sink drama'—generally used by those who did not care for plays like *Look Back in Anger*, and who perhaps saw the dark comedy of the time as a sign of imminent social revolution. It was in any case an empty and silly phrase, but one

dramatist for whose work it could reasonably be used was Arnold Wesker (born 1932). His play *The Kitchen* was actually set in the kitchen of a London restaurant, and showed the relations, both tragic and comic, between the people working there. With the possible exception of Harold Pinter (who is seen by many critics as the most important dramatist of the last two decades), Wesker seems to me the most important writer of dark comedy. It would be foolish to argue whether he is a better dramatist than either Osborne or Pinter; but from the point of view of the foreign reader or the student of literature who cannot always see or hear the plays he would like to, Wesker is probably the most readable. His three plays *Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots* and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (now often referred to as the Wesker trilogy) were started in the 1950s, and are concerned with the same Jewish family from the East End of London. The trilogy shows a group of people who are basically loving and idealistic, trying in a small way to improve the world and build a better life for themselves, but generally defeated and frustrated by the hard facts of life and human nature. I do not know whether Wesker's trilogy will ever be described as 'great' literature, but it seems to me to have that unusual mixture of comedy and tragedy, social consciousness and human warmth, which one finds in writers like Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dickens.

Some of the most successful of the younger dramatists have been much influenced by the so-called 'theatre of the absurd'. It is uncertain who invented the phrase, but the kind of plays it suggests began in France with the strange works of Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. Beckett (born 1906) is an Irishman who has lived most of his life in Paris, and who chose to write most of his plays in French. One of them, *Waiting for Godot*, was performed in London (in English translation) in the 1950s. Audiences found it puzzling, but it was extremely successful, and established Beckett as one of the chief influences in the English experimental theatre. For the ordinary reader or spectator it is difficult to see what Beckett's plays are about. In *Endgame* (1957) the characters live in dustbins, and the audience sees only their heads and shoulders. In *Happy Days* the woman who is almost the only speaking character is slowly buried in sand until, at the end of the play, only her head is visible. In *Come and Go* (which lasts for three minutes) there is no action, and only 121 words!

As long as enough people are willing to pay to see their plays, writers in the theatre of the absurd are in the happy position of being beyond all question or criticism. This is well illustrated by the story of the lady who wrote to Harold Pinter about his play *The Birthday Party*:

Dear Sir, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your play. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are the two men? 2. Where did Stanley come from? 3. Were they all supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to my questions I cannot understand your play.

Pinter replied (according to *The Daily Mail* of 28 November 1967, quoted by Martin Esslin in his study of Pinter, *The Peopled Wound*),

Dear Madam, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are you? 2. Where do you come from? 3. Are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to your questions I cannot fully understand your letter.

Apart from Pinter the chief writers to use the ideas of the theatre of the absurd in the 1960s were N. F. Simpson (*A Resounding Tinkle*), the American dramatist Edward Albee (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*) and Tom Stoppard (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*). It is hard to say what readers and audiences in the year 2000 will think of these examples of modern dark comedy. I myself find them difficult and tedious to read, but fascinating to see and hear. I suspect that the foreign reader may have the same difficulty, and I advise him not to spend too much time reading plays of this kind, but to take every possible opportunity of seeing them in the theatre. (Or of course in the cinema: there is an excellent film of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*)

The proper relationship between plays in books and plays on the stage or screen is often forgotten—especially by readers and writers of this kind of book. Being students of literature we easily forget that a play in print is like a symphony on score-paper: the *real* symphony is what we hear in the concert hall, interpreted by conductor and orchestra; the *real* play is what we see and hear on the stage, interpreted by producer and actors—with the help of scene-designers, costume-designers, make-up artists and other technical and artistic experts. So when reading a play—and especially a comedy—one should try to think of it in terms of sound and movement. Often when reading a Shakespeare comedy for example one cannot avoid feeling that some of the conversation is childish and silly. Young Gobbo's argument with his conscience in *The Merchant of Venice*, and many of

Touchstone's jokes in *As You Like It*, are not very amusing to read; but to see and hear them, made by a good actor, is quite a different experience. A passage like this (from *As You Like It*) seems to have no point when read in silence; but heard as an accompaniment to a sequence of dance-like movements on the stage it gets colour, beauty and meaning:

Phoebe: Good shepherd, tell this youth what 'tis to love.

Silvius: It is to be all made of sighs and tears—

And so am I for Phoebe.

Phoebe: And I for Ganymede.

Orlando: And I for Rosalind.

Rosalind: And I for no woman.

Silvius: It is to be all made of faith and service—

And so am I for Phoebe.

Phoebe: And I for Ganymede.

Orlando: And I for Rosalind.

Rosalind: And I for no woman.

Silvius: It is to be all made of fantasy,

All made of passion, and all made of wishes;

All adoration, duty, and observance;

All humbleness, all patience, and impatience;

All purity, all trial, all obeisance;

And so am I for Phoebe.

Phoebe: And so am I for Ganymede.

Orlando: And so am I for Rosalind.

Rosalind: And so am I for no woman.

It is too easy for the literary man to forget that this sort of thing is meant to be acted—that it would have been imagined by Shakespeare with all the accompaniments of gesture, costume, setting and perhaps music, which go to make up a play. There is a popular phrase 'good theatre', and nothing, I think, can be called good drama unless it is also good theatre. This clearly applies especially to the art of stage comedy. There has been no greater practitioner of this art than the French playwright, Jean Baptiste Poquelin (1622-73), now known to the world under his stage name of Molière. Most of his plays were written for performance at the court of the French King, Louis XIV. I should like to quote a few lines from the introduction he wrote to a little comedy called *L'Amour Médecin* (*Love's the Best Doctor*, as John Wood calls it in the admirable translation from which I quote):

It is hardly necessary to remind the reader that in such a play

very much depends on performance. Everyone knows that plays are written to be acted, and this one I commend only to those readers who can see it in terms of the finished production. Furthermore, one would wish that works of this kind might always be seen with the embellishments which they enjoy when performed before His Majesty where they appear to much greater advantage, and the music of the incomparable Monsieur Lully, the fine singing and the skill of the dancers, lend them a charm without which they would hardly pass muster.

I have quoted Molière's words in order to emphasise as strongly as possible that stage comedies are intended to be acted. Molière was himself an actor, as were Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Osborne, Harold Pinter and a great many other successful dramatists; and this is clear to anyone who takes the trouble to read a few pages of *The Miser* (*L'Avare*) or *The Would-be Gentleman* (*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*). Sheridan (see page 186) was not an actor, but there is no doubt of his sense of theatre, for he became part-owner of Drury Lane theatre in London, and, as a Member of Parliament, knew how to obtain dramatic effects. The passage I am going to quote from his first play, *The Rivals* (produced when he was only twenty-four), is a good example of comedy written to be heard and seen—not merely read. As conversation it is only mildly amusing, but as a stage situation it is very funny indeed.

The Rivals is a comedy of manners which invites us (among other things) to laugh at the social conventions of the duel. When the play appeared in the 1770s duelling was still common—indeed Sheridan himself had fought two duels in France against a certain Major Matthews. In England however people were beginning to realise that it was a bad habit, and that the idea of a gentleman being obliged to fight about matters of imaginary honour was not only uncivilised but also ridiculous. In the scene from which I quote we see Bob Acres and Sir Lucius O'Trigger waiting at King's Mead Fields near Bath, in the half-light of the early morning, for the appearance of the mysterious Ensign Beverley with whom Acres is going to fight a duel. Acres is a simple country landowner who does not want to fight anybody; but Sir Lucius has persuaded him that it is an 'affair of honour' because Beverley is his rival in love. Sir Lucius, acting as Acres's second, has brought the duelling pistols with him. He hands one to Acres, and keeps the other himself. (Some of the fun depends upon Sir Lucius having a strong Irish accent, and Acres an equally strong West Country way of speech—including out-of-date oaths like 'Odds bodykins' and 'Zounds'.)

- Sir Lucius: I suppose, Mr Acres, you never were engaged in an affair of this kind before?
- Acres: No, Sir Lucius, never before.
- Sir Lucius: Ah! that's a pity!—there's nothing like being used to a thing. Pray now, how would you receive the gentleman's shot?
- Acres: Odds files!—I've practised that—there, Sir Lucius—there. (*Puts himself in an attitude.*) A side-front, hey? Odd! I'll make myself small enough? I'll stand edgeways.
- Sir Lucius: Now—you're quite out—for if you stand so when I take my aim—(*Levelling at him.*)
- Acres: Zounds! Sir Lucius—are you sure it is not cocked?
- Sir Lucius: Never fear.
- Acres: But—but—you don't know—it may go off of its own head!
- Sir Lucius: Pho! be easy.—Well, now if I hit you in the body, my bullet has a double chance—for if it misses a vital part of your right side, 'twill be very hard if it don't succeed on the left!
- Acres: A vital part?
- Sir Lucius: But, there—fix yourself so—(*Placing him*)—let him see the broad-side of your full front—there—now a ball or two may pass clean through your body, and never do any harm at all.
- Acres: Clean through me!—a ball or two clean through me!
- Sir Lucius: Ay—may they—and it is much the genteelest attitude into the bargain.
- Acres: Look'ee! Sir Lucius—I'd just as lieve be shot in an awkward posture as a genteel one; so, by my valour! I will stand edgeways.
- Sir Lucius: (*Looking at his watch*): Sure they don't mean to disappoint us—Hah!—no, faith—I think I see them coming.
- Acres: Hey!—what!—coming!—
- Sir Lucius: Ay.—Who are those yonder getting over the stile?
- Acres: There are two of them indeed!—well—let them come—hey, Sir Lucius!—we—we—we—we—won't run.
- Sir Lucius: Run!
- Acres: No—I say—we won't run, by my valour!
- Sir Lucius: What the devil's the matter with you?
- Acres: Nothing—nothing—my dear friend—my dear Sir Lucius—but I—I—I don't feel quite so bold, somehow, as I did.

It is worth noting that Sheridan's purpose here, as in all his comedy, is to amuse and entertain. This is also true of nearly all the great comic writers. There is of course no clear border-line between comedy and satire; even the lightest comedy must contain some kind of social comment, as we recognise in the phrase 'comedy of manners'. But when a dramatist tries too hard (as Shaw often did) to use the stage as a base for lectures and sermons and propaganda, we must expect the death of true comedy. One of the less attractive features of drama between 1920 and 1970 has been a continuing attempt by some writers and critics to persuade us that plays which merely set out to amuse and entertain are less good than plays which try to be profound or significant. Most of us, I think, do not go to the theatre for advice about difficult problems of politics or morality: we are not very interested in the opinions of dramatists, however clever, on such matters as the war in Vietnam or the truth of the Christian religion. There may be a place for the kind of drama that preaches—especially in societies which are illiterate, like the audiences of the miracle plays in medieval times—but generally it must be said that teaching and preaching are no part of true comedy.

I said at the beginning that a comedy is almost always taken to mean a stage comedy, but comedy itself is something to be found in other forms of literature, especially the novel. One of the best descriptions of the comic spirit was in fact written by a novelist, George Meredith (1828-1909), in his *Essay on Comedy*. In the following words he describes the way in which the Comic Spirit (personified) looks at human life:

Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually or in the bulk—the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.

We may not like Meredith's style in this passage, but we can scarcely disagree with his very thoughtful description of the comic view of life.

Probably the world's greatest masterpiece of non-dramatic comedy is *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, published by Miguel de Cervantes in 1605 (a second part appeared in 1615). The characters of Don Quixote and his servant, Sancho Panza, stand with Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff among the great comic figures of European literature. 'The whole significance of the story', writes L. J. Potts, 'lies in the contrast between Quixote and Sancho Panza, and in two subordinate contrasts within this dominant one: between Quixote's nobility of mind and his absurdity of behaviour, and between Sancho's cynical peasant selfishness and his irrational loyalty to his master. Not only does this book contain two of the most famous characters in the literature of the world; but in conceiving them Cervantes almost divided the whole of human nature in two, with the neatness of a surgeon's knife.' It is important to remember that no great comic novel, certainly not *Don Quixote*, is merely a funny book. Indeed a book which sets out to be purely comic is likely to be a failure; the comedy must be mixed with pathos, and the humour must be warm and humane so that we love what we laugh at, and laugh at what we love. It is largely to Cervantes that we owe the tradition of the English comic novel from Fielding to Dickens; a tradition followed in their different ways by Smollett, Sterne, Goldsmith, George Eliot and Trollope; a tradition which started when Fielding stated on the title-page of *Joseph Andrews* that it was 'written in the manner of Cervantes', and which even persists in some modern novels such as Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*. I shall have a little more to say about Dickens as the most famous of our non-dramatic comic writers, but first I must return to one of whom something has already been said in earlier chapters of this book, namely Chaucer.

With the possible exception of Byron, Chaucer is unique among major English poets in being also a major comic writer. Indeed *The Canterbury Tales* includes the whole range of comedy, from the coarse and lively farce of *The Miller's Tale* to the delicate mixture of romance and comedy in *The Franklin's Tale*. I have already referred to the satirical humour of *The Prologue*, but Chaucer's comic masterpiece, which is indeed one of the comic masterpieces of the world, is *The Nun's Priest's Tale* of Chanticleer the Cock and his wife Pertelote. The story is an old one, and probably well known to most people. Chanticleer wakes up one morning distressed by a terrifying dream in which he has seen a dog-like animal with burning eyes, about to attack him. Pertelote, favourite among his seven wives, comforts him by saying that he has an upset stomach and that some medicine will soon put him right. Chanticleer begins to feel better, and is soon marching about the yard followed by his admiring wives:

' Behold the sun! The sun is up, my seven.
 Look, it has climbed forty degrees in heaven,
 Forty degrees and one in fact, by this.
 Dear Madam Pertelote, my earthly bliss,
 Hark to those blissful birds and how they sing!
 Look at those pretty flowers, how they spring!
 Solace and revel fill my heart!' He laughed.
 But in that moment Fate let fly her shaft;
 Ever the latter end of joy is woe,
 God knows that worldly joy is swift to go.

There follows a typically Chaucerian passage where he pretends to moralise about the uncertainty of human joys; then Chanticleer, to his great surprise, finds himself face to face with Sir Russel, the fox. Terrified, he is about to fly away when Sir Russel addresses him in the politest tones, praising his fine voice and appearance, and referring with respect and admiration to his father, of whom Russel had made an enjoyable dinner at some time in the past:

My Lord your Father (God receive his soul!)
 Your mother too—how courtly, what control!—
 Have honoured my poor house, to my great ease;
 And you, sir, too, I should be glad to please.
 For, when it comes to singing, I'll say this
 (Else may these eyes of mine be barred from bliss),
 There never was a singer I would rather
 Have heard at dawn than your respected father.
 All that he sang came welling from his soul
 And how he put his voice under control!
 The pains he took to keep his eyes tight shut
 In concentration—then the tip-toe strut,
 The slender neck stretched out, the delicate beak!
 No singer could approach him in technique.

Chanticleer is easily persuaded to show that he is as good a singer as his father was. The minute he shuts his eyes and opens his mouth (as did his father in the lively description just quoted) he is 'hent by the gargat' (seized by the throat), and carried off towards the wood. There follows the famous description of the chase, in which all the village takes part. Chanticleer, helpless in the fox's mouth, has to admit that he is fairly caught. 'But', he says to Sir Russel, 'if I were

in your position I should certainly want to turn round and laugh at my pursuers.' This is exactly what the fox does, and Chanticleer, escaping from his teeth, flies to the safety of a high tree. The moral of this fable (for it is basically a fable which Chaucer has transformed into a masterpiece of sophisticated comedy) is 'Don't shut your eyes when you ought to keep them open, and don't open your mouth when you ought to keep it shut.'

And as for those who blink when they should look,
God blot them from his everlasting Book!
'Nay, rather,' said the fox, 'his plagues be flung
On all who chatter that should hold their tongue.'

The comedy in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* lies partly in the story itself, but mainly in Chaucer's way of treating it. The characters (like Orwell's in *Animal Farm*) talk and behave like recognisable types of human being: Chanticleer is a pompous middle-aged gentleman, Pertelote is a hard-headed but kindly wife who knows exactly how to manage him, and Russel is the smooth and persuasive confidence man—all typical characters, at least as old as Plautus and Terence. Added to this is the contrast between the simple story and the high style, the mock-philosophical discussion, the rich display of learning, the entertaining digressions, and the comical irony of which Chaucer is a master. In some ways the tale makes good-natured fun of a sermon; and a good deal of its humour depends on its suitability to the story-teller—a quiet and retiring priest acting as chaplain to a group of nuns taking part in the journey to Canterbury. Here is his comment on the fact that it was Pertelote's advice that brought poor Chanticleer into mortal danger:

O woman's counsel is so often cold!
A woman's counsel brought us first to woe,
Made Adam out of Paradise to go
Where he had been so merry, so well at ease.
But, for I know not whom it may displease
If I suggest that women are to blame,
Pass over that; I only speak in game.
Read the authorities to know about
What has been said of women; you'll find out.
These are the cock's words, and not mine, I'm giving;
I think no harm of any woman living.

On this polite note we must leave the Nun's Priest and this near-perfect example of comic narrative.

Dickens (see page 147) is certainly the great English master of comedy in the novel, though with the exception of *The Pickwick Papers* none of his major works is wholly comic in intention. I said above that a book (as distinct from a play) which sets out to be wholly comic is likely to be a failure, and it may be that *Pickwick* is the exception to this. When we consider Dickens's other novels however we can only admire the wide range of emotions they express, from the most deeply tragic to the most absurd and farcical. Dickens indeed gives us comedy as we see it in life, not in isolation but shining out of the dullness of everyday work or breaking through the gloom of even the most serious tragedy. His comic genius shows itself chiefly in the creation of great comic characters but also in a highly individual (but easily imitated) prose style, which for some reason seems perfectly right for comic narrative. He had too a sharp ear for the oddities of speech; and he used this to good effect in comic dialogue.

Looking for comic characters we can scarcely think of the novels of Dickens without exclaiming, as Dryden did of Chaucer, 'Here is God's plenty.' The world he invented is peopled by every kind of human creature ranging from the grotesque evil of Quilp (in *The Old Curiosity Shop*) and Uriah Heep to the lovable absurdity of Wilkins Micawber and Betsy Trotwood (all three from *David Copperfield*). It has been objected that Dickens's characters are mere caricatures. This may be so, although study of one's fellow human beings leads one to believe that there is no limit to human oddity; in any case the writer of comedy is under no obligation to give us characters which are rounded and whole. A character like Uriah Heep may be a caricature, but he is horribly alive.

To say that Dickens owed a great deal to his illustrators is in no way to detract from his creative genius; but it is a fact that the drawings of Cruikshank and H. K. Browne ('Phiz') have helped to fix his characters in our imaginations in such a way that they seem almost more real than the people we meet every day. Whether or not we see them, however, almost all the characters invented by Dickens are colourful and alive—pompous hypocrites like Mr Chadband in *Bleak House* and Mr Pecksniff in *Martin Chuzzlewit*; snobs like Mrs Merdle in *Little Dorrit* and the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend*; simple and likeable characters like Wemmick in *Great Expectations*; clever rogues like Sam Weller in *Pickwick* and Dick Swiveller in *The Old Curiosity Shop*; kindly and honest folk like Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations* and the Peggottys in *David Copperfield*; jolly old fellows like Captain Cuttle in *Dombey and Son* and the Cheeryble brothers in *Nicholas Nickleby*—all these mix with

the normal characters whose adventures provide the plots of the novels, with grotesques like Mrs Gummidge and Mr Dick in *David Copperfield*, and with the giants of comedy like Mr Micawber and Mr Pickwick himself.

Considering the times he lived in and the circumstances of his own life it is scarcely surprising that the comic genius of Dickens was often used in satire; he is indeed, with Chaucer, an outstanding example of the fact that humour is probably the most powerful weapon in the satirist's armoury. Sarah Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewit* may well have impressed upon the young Florence Nightingale the evils of bad nursing; the cruel slowness of the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House* must have awakened many Englishmen to the need for its extensive reform; the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit* still reminds us of the worst horrors of bureaucracy.

I have already said that much of Dickens's comedy lies in his peculiarly lively and amusing prose style. It is long-winded and full of clichés, but somehow it succeeds in creating the atmosphere of true comedy, especially when used to represent the oddities of individual speech. To illustrate this I shall quote a well-known passage from the court scene in *The Pickwick Papers*: the famous case of Bardell versus Pickwick, where Pickwick's landlady, Mrs Bardell, encouraged by the villainous pair of lawyers, Dodson and Fogg, claims money from him because (she says) he has broken his promise to marry her. Mrs Bardell's lawyer, Serjeant Buzfuz, produces a notice which Mrs Bardell has displayed in the window of her house in Goswell Street. ('Serjeant' in this sense is a title, abolished in 1880, formerly used by leading lawyers. Buzfuz would now probably be a Q.C.)

'There is no date, gentlemen,' replied Serjeant Buzfuz, 'but I am instructed to say that it was put in the plaintiff's parlour window just this time three years. I entreat the attention of the jury to the wording of this document. "Apartments furnished for a single gentleman"! Mrs Bardell's opinions of the opposite sex, gentlemen, were derived from a long contemplation of the inestimable qualities of her lost husband. She had no fear, she had no distrust, she had no suspicion, all was confidence and reliance. "Mr Bardell," said the widow; "Mr Bardell was a man of honour, Mr Bardell was a man of his word, Mr Bardell was no deceiver, Mr Bardell was once a single gentleman himself; to single gentlemen I look for protection, for assistance, for comfort, and for consolation; in single gentlemen I shall perpetually see something to remind me of what Mr Bardell was, when he first won my young and untried affections; to a single gentleman,

then, shall my lodgings be let." Actuated by this beautiful and touching impulse (among the best impulses of our imperfect, nature, gentlemen) the lonely and desolate widow dried her tears, furnished her first-floor, caught the innocent boy to her maternal bosom, and put the bill up in her parlour-window. Did it remain there long? No. The serpent was on the watch, the train was laid, the mine was preparing, the sapper and miner was at work. Before the bill had been in the parlour-window three days—three days—gentlemen—a Being, erect upon two legs, and bearing all the outward semblance of a man, and not of a monster, knocked at the door of Mrs Bardell's house. He inquired within; he took the lodgings; and on the very next day he entered into possession of them. This man was Pickwick—Pickwick, the Defendant.'

Serjeant Buzfuz, who had proceeded with such volubility that his face was perfectly crimson, here paused for breath. The silence awoke Mr Justice Stareleigh, who immediately wrote down something with a pen without any ink in it, and looked unusually profound, to impress the jury with the belief that he always thought most deeply with his eyes shut. Serjeant Buzfuz proceeded.

'Of this man Pickwick I will say little; the subject presents but few attractions; and I, gentlemen, am not the man, nor are you, gentlemen, the men, to delight in the contemplation of revolting heartlessness, and of systematic villainy.'

Here Mr Pickwick, who had been writhing in silence for some time, gave a violent start, as if some vague idea of assaulting Serjeant Buzfuz, in august presence of justice and the law, suggested itself to his mind. An admonitory gesture from Perker restrained him, and he listened to the learned gentleman's continuation with a look of indignation . . .

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Short Story

In some chapters of this book I have used several pages in defining or describing the particular kind of literature we were thinking about. It is not easy for example to explain shortly what is meant by Tragedy or Epic. In the present chapter however no such difficulty arises. If we are asked what is meant by a Short Story we need only say it is a story which is short! The use of capital letters may suggest that the Short Story is a form or genre having rules of its own: such is by no means the case, and I shall therefore drop the use of capitals in the rest of this chapter, following the guidance of one of the most successful short-story writers of our own time, H. E. Bates (see below page 225) who wrote,

The basis of almost every argument or conclusion I can make is the axiom that the short story can be anything that the author decides it shall be.

The shortest of short stories may be no more than a page or two in length; the longest, like D. H. Lawrence's *St Mawr* for example, may run to over a hundred pages. Obviously there comes a point at which it is impossible to draw a line between the long short story and the short novel. Some modern critics have revived the word *novella* as a name for the doubtful examples, and this is what I shall do here in order to avoid too-frequent use of the awkward phrase 'long short story'. The *novella* in this sense is different from the genuine short novel in its smaller number of characters, its less varied setting, and its simpler plot. The word might fairly be applied not only to *St Mawr*, but to several other of Lawrence's tales (such as *The Captain's Doll* and *The Virgin and the Gipsy*) and to stories like Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* or Somerset Maugham's *Rain*. Maugham's words about the art of narrative (see page 109) are worth quoting again in connection with the short story, a type of literature in which he himself excelled:

... the desire to listen to stories appears to be as deeply rooted in the human animal as the sense of property. From the beginning of history men have gathered round the camp fire, or in a group in the market place, to listen to the telling of a story.

Alongside this I shall quote the words of Maugham's contemporary, H. G. Wells—himself a master of the story-teller's art:

A short story is, or should be, a simple thing; it aims at producing one single vivid effect; it has to seize the attention at the outset, and never relaxing, gather it together more and more until the climax is reached. The limits of the human capacity to attend closely therefore set a limit to it: it must explode and finish before interruption occurs or fatigue sets in.

Critics and literary historians sometimes speak of the short story as though it were something new—a product of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Although this is far from being true there is no doubt, so far as mere productivity is concerned, that this was the great time for the short story. The increase of literacy in Britain and America after about 1800 created a demand for 'periodical' literature of all kinds. Many novels of course appeared in serial form, being printed in monthly or fortnightly parts; but much of the demand for fiction was met by magazines like *Blackwoods*, *The Strand* or *The Argosy*. Literally hundreds of such magazines were published regularly through the second half of the last century and the first half of this. Some of them, like *Sunday at Home*, *The Quiver* and *Household Words* (started by Dickens in 1850), had a religious or instructive tone; others offered simple entertainment: but all used short stories as the main way of filling pages, thus offering a ready market to the writers of the day, both good and bad. In these circumstances it was not surprising that the short story flourished—indeed it became the chief literary food of millions of readers, and remained so until the second quarter of our present century when the magazines began to fade away with the rise of broadcasting and the development of paperback publishing.

Although the short story did not reach the height of its popularity until the beginning of the present century it is, as Maugham suggests in the passage quoted above, one of the oldest types of literature. In the Bible, the Old Testament is full of wonderful short stories which modern writers have borrowed or imitated over and over again. Indeed the Old Testament has been called 'the unread best seller', and I would strongly advise any readers who are unfamiliar with it,

or who think of it as a book only to be read in church, to search for some of the excellent stories it contains. Even older than these are the stories to be found in the *Histories* of Herodotus (c 480-425 B.C.). Herodotus was a historian, but seems to have been more concerned with the strangeness, or the human interest, of his history than with its actual truth. The result is that his book contains many highly readable tales and shows Herodotus as a master of simple, direct storytelling. Of course Herodotus had no idea of the short story as a literary form in its own right: like the writers of the Old Testament, he was concerned with more serious matters of history, religion and philosophy. I have mentioned these early writers however because they possessed at least one gift which one hopes to find in every short-story writer: the ability to invent (or to recognise in real life) a plot or a situation with real human interest.

It would clearly be impossible in one short chapter to give anything like a history or a survey of the short story as a form of literature. All I shall attempt therefore is to introduce a few writers who seem to me to be masters in this kind of writing, and to point out some outstanding examples of their work. In making any such selection one is of course laying oneself open to objections from all sorts of people. Many academic critics would think it wrong to mention Conan Doyle in the same chapter as Henry James, or to place Somerset Maugham next to D. H. Lawrence. Our concern here however is not so much with ultimate literary values (if such things exist) as with literature which has given pleasure to millions of intelligent readers, and which must therefore be of some importance. We must remind ourselves again that many of the world's best-known short stories have been written in the last hundred years: this means that they are too recent to be safely evaluated. The difficulty is well illustrated by Kipling, whose stories we shall be discussing soon: to some critics he has appeared as one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, of English short-story writers; yet there are others (no doubt equally sensitive) who find his style unpleasant and many of his themes disgusting. Before we can evaluate him we shall have to wait another fifty years until some of the prejudices which now surround him have disappeared. The reader should understand therefore that I have chosen these writers because I happen to like their work, and because I think that their stories will be of interest both to the foreign reader and the English student. What makes a good short story is, as in most things, a matter of individual taste. The reader who wishes to decide what his own tastes are may like to compare two stories on a very similar theme by two writers who, I think, are universally accepted as masters—Guy de Maupassant (1850-93) and Henry James (see page 147).

Maupassant, though strictly out of place in a book about English literature, must be seen, with Chekhov, as among the few greatest short-story writers of the world. He wrote some three hundred tales, one of which is called *The Necklace*. It so happens that James also wrote a short story about a necklace. His story, *Paste*, is about a set of pearls which were believed to be worthless imitations but which were in fact immensely valuable. Maupassant's necklace on the other hand was of imitation diamonds which the girl who borrowed it believed to be real. But having lost it, and gone to desperate lengths to obtain enough money to repay its owner, she learned (in the last line of the story) that the diamonds were in fact worthless imitations. The similarity of the two stories hides a profound difference in treatment. Maupassant's approach is that of the naturalistic writer: direct, detached, almost scientific. The tragic little story is placed before us without comment, and without much attempt at psychological depth (though with a great deal of artistic skill). James's approach is, as one would expect, less simple. The characters of the cousins, Arthur and Charlotte Prime, are skilfully revealed in conversations which remind us that James had ambitions (never successfully realised) as a dramatist. A comparison of *Paste* and *The Necklace* makes a good starting-point for anyone who is interested in the technique of the short story. It is also a good introduction to Henry James—especially for readers who find his novels tedious or difficult.

Henry James (1843-1916), though American by birth, spent much of his life in England and took British nationality in 1915. The first short-story writer I propose to consider at some length, Edgar Allan Poe, also came from America (though he spent some of his school days in England), and worked for most of his short life in the United States. His world-wide popularity over the past hundred years and the enormous influence he has had over later writers are sufficient to justify, if not compel, his inclusion in any study of the short story.

Poe (1809-49) was born in Boston, Massachusetts, and lost his parents in early childhood. His guardian, a kindly and generous man, sent him to school in England, and afterwards to the university of Virginia. Here he developed those habits of wildness and dissipation which were to spoil his life and bring about his early death. After a time at the military academy at West Point, from which he was expelled at the age of twenty-two, Poe turned to journalism—a profession in which he was able, despite many failures, difficulties and quarrels, to develop the extraordinary imaginative and poetic gifts which he possessed, and which must surely have made him one of the oddest military men ever to have worn a uniform. In 1833 he won a hundred-dollar prize offered by the *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* with

his extraordinary tale *A Manuscript found in a Bottle*. Three years later he married his fourteen-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm, for whom he seems to have had a deep and sincere affection. During the next ten years Poe won a considerable reputation as a poet, critic and writer of strange stories. There was no reason why he should not have enjoyed considerable worldly success, but something perverse in his nature (one of his tales is called *The Imp of the Perverse*) always made him quarrel with his friends, and ruin his health by drinking. When he was thirty-eight his wife died after a long and difficult illness, and Poe returned to a life of dissipation. Poe's life, pathetic as it was in so many respects, offers the material for a long psychological novel. At present however we are concerned only with his work as a writer of short stories.

Most of Poe's tales appeared in various magazines with which he was associated, especially the *Southern Literary Messenger* of which he was editor for a short time. A collection of his best stories was made under the title, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, and it is probably in this volume that the modern reader will make his acquaintance. Stories like *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt* and *The Gold Bug* show Poe as the father of the detective story as it developed in the later nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. They are written in the strong and simple prose of a practical journalist, and they keep (more or less) to the rules which we now regard as traditional in the detective tale—namely that it should be realistic and that the author should not conceal from the reader any of the clues which may lead to the solution of the mystery. As father (or at least one of the fathers) of the detective thriller, Poe deserves a high place in the history of literature; for even if we feel that most detective stories do not deserve to be called serious literature, we cannot but admit that the best of them have given much pleasure to many millions of readers. As our space is limited however I shall concentrate upon another side of Poe, the side on which he shows himself, I think, as a writer of great power.

The horrible, the psychopathic, the fantastic, the mad—these are the aspects of life which appealed to Poe's romantic imagination, and which he places before the half-unwilling reader in fantasies like *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Masque of the Red Death*. In order to understand him fully one should perhaps know something of the so-called 'Terror School' and the cult of the 'Gothic' which were features of the romantic revival in Britain and Europe, and which no doubt fascinated Poe when he was young; one also needs to consider those later writers and artists who have been influenced by Poe—men like the French poet Baudelaire (1821-67), and (in

the world of the cinema, the makers of those 'psychological thrillers' and 'horror films' which still fascinate so many of us.

To choose one's favourites from Poe's tales of fantasy is of course to invite complaint and disagreement from those whose tastes are different. My own favourite (for reasons which I shall give shortly) is *The Black Cat*; but there are many others which might be named as masterpieces. *The Cask of Amontillado* describes, against a background of Venetian carnival, how a murderer leads his victim to the cellars to taste a particularly fine sherry, then chains him into a corner, and starts to bury him alive behind a brick wall. The victim, at first slightly drunk, does not realise what is happening. Gradually he cools down, and as he does so he becomes aware that his companion, far from being engaged in a rather horrible joke, is deadly serious. Only a few pages in length, this little story is in many ways a model of what a short story should be: neat, dramatic and full of atmosphere. *The Pit and the Pendulum* is a nightmare of suspense and horror based on the tortures of the Spanish Inquisition. *William Wilson*, partly based on Poe's memories of his schooldays at Stoke Newington in England, is a clever and frightening 'surprise story' in which a young man is haunted by his own ghost or 'double'—a theme, incidentally, treated with equal dramatic power in Schubert's famous song, *Der Doppelgänger*. *A Descent into the Maelstrom* is a story of great originality, both its matter and its manner being, as it were, half way between Poe's dream-like horrors and the more down-to-earth style of *The Gold Bug*. It is about a small boat caught in the great whirlpool off the west coast of Norway. In fact (and especially in the days of steam or diesel-powered ships) the maelstrom is a comparatively mild affair—certainly no more terrifying than some of the tidal whirlpools around our own coasts. In Poe's imagination however it becomes an enormous, swirling funnel of black water, rather like the whirlpool of an emptying bath magnified a million times. The story is a splendid example of Poe's skill in creating an atmosphere of terror and suspense.

I have mentioned *The Black Cat* as a story which, as it seems to me, shows Poe at his best. The narrator (as in most of Poe's stories, the tale is told in the first person) is a drunkard, married to a gentle and devoted wife and bitterly conscious of his own failure as a human being. The couple have a black cat to which the wife becomes devoted while the husband develops an unreasoning hate of it. Gradually his hate of the animal becomes a madness, and he begins to notice that a white mark on the cat's throat is shaped like a gallows. One night, having returned home in an excited and drunken state, the man is driven to attack the cat with an axe. His wife, in a pathetic

effort to save her pet, stands in his way, and is herself struck down and killed. Appalled at what he has done, the man takes his wife's body to the cellar, where he hides it in a corner, over which he builds a wall, as did the murderer in *The Cask of Amontillado*. After this he feels a sense of satisfaction and security, particularly as the black cat, which he had so feared and hated, seems to have disappeared.

Some time later a search for the missing woman begins. Police call at the house, which they search from top to bottom without suspecting where her body is hidden. Unable to conceal his excitement, the murderer gives himself away in a manner which Poe describes thus:

'Gentlemen,' I said at last, as the party ascended the steps, 'I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health and a little more courtesy. By the by, gentlemen, this—this is a very well-constructed house' (in the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all)—'I may say an *excellently* well-constructed house. These walls—are you going, gentlemen?—these walls are solidly put together'; and here, through the mere frenzy of bravado, I rapped heavily with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brickwork behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom.

But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend! No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb!—by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman—a howl—a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation.

Of my own thoughts it is folly to peak. Swooning, I staggered to the opposite wall. For one instant the party on the stairs remained motionless, through extremity of terror and awe. In the next a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall. It fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb.

It is clear even from the above short passage that the style Poe uses in his more fantastic tales is very different from the more everyday prose of (say) *The Gold Bug*. He uses an artificial, almost poetical language which well suits the fantasy of his subjects. Unfortunately however this sort of language has been imitated by generations of lesser writers of 'mystery and horror', with the result that it has lost something of its original effect. Poe's style at its worst is easy to parody, but so (we may remind ourselves) is the style of any great artist of marked individuality.

I have already mentioned Poe as the father of the detective story. Before we look at another major writer of short stories, Kipling, we may perhaps allow ourselves a short digression on the subject of Poe's followers in this particular kind of literature. The detective in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Mystery of Marie Roget* was Inspector Dupin—direct ancestor of the famous French writer Simenon's Inspector Maigret. To name Dupin's other descendants would be an almost impossible task. Sergeant Cuff, the detective invented by Wilkie Collins (1824-89), was one of the first; and he has been followed by such professionals as Inspector French and Poirot—not to mention clever amateurs like G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown and Dorothy Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey. Above them all stands the bony form and hawk-like features of Sherlock Holmes, created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930). The Holmes stories (beginning with *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887) may safely be described as the most widely read short stories in the world. Even in the very different world of the 1970s their popularity seems as wide as ever, and they continue to make admirable material for film and television producers. Besides being an early writer of science fiction (in the 'Professor Challenger' stories) and the inventor of Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle wrote a number of tales of the macabre and the supernatural, very much in the tradition of Poe: among the best of them is *The Leather Funnel*. In the same tradition, or one closely related, are the ghost stories of M. R. James (1862-1936). A scholar and antiquarian, James had an extraordinary gift for making the reader's flesh creep with his stories of mysterious but all-too-real visitors like the ghost in *O Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad* and the terrible guardian of the old book in *The Tractate Middoth*. Ghosts and ghost stories are perhaps among the good things we have lost on the march of technological progress, but no general view of the short story would be complete without some mention of the detective story and the story of the supernatural. Both kinds can claim Poe as their most important ancestor.

It would be difficult, I suppose, to think of two writers more different

than Poe and the next writer who claims our attention, Rudyard Kipling. I have already suggested that Kipling's place in English literature is a questionable one: he still arouses feelings of dislike in many readers (including some who are not very well acquainted with his work), yet there are others, including such good judges as T.S. Eliot, Somerset Maugham and the American critic, Edmund Wilson, who see his work as being of considerable importance. Even those who frankly admit their dislike are generally willing to admit that Kipling is a major author, and one of the great masters of the short story: yet there *is* something about the man which many of us find unpleasant. It is not easy to see just what it is, and before we attempt to do so it would be well to say something of his life story.

Born in 1865 in Bombay, Rudyard Kipling was the son of a professor who afterwards became curator of the Lahore museum. After five years, during which many of his childish conversations were in Hindustani, he was sent to England, first to live with a private family in Southsea and afterwards to school at the United Services College, a school mainly for the sons of officers. Even here his literary skill and inventiveness began to show themselves, and were recognised by some of his teachers in what seems otherwise to have been a rather bad school. At seventeen Rudyard returned to India, and began work as assistant editor of *The Civil and Military Gazette*. Five years later he moved to Allahabad to become editor of a weekly edition of *The Pioneer*. By 1889 he had become well known as a writer, and decided to return to England. Here he spent the rest of his life apart from a short stay in Vermont, U.S.A., and a number of visits to India and other places.

He lived through two wars—the Boer War in South Africa, and the Great War of 1914-18. He saw the end of the Victorian age in which he had felt so much at home, and the beginnings of a new, less imperialistic Britain. When he died in 1936 he was world-famous, though still looked on with distrust by a literary world in which 'sensitivity' and refinement were necessary virtues: Kipling always admired the 'men of action,' the 'strong, silent men' who had carried the responsibilities of empire in his younger days, and whom he had known so well in his early years as a journalist in India.

There is no doubt that the years of childhood and youth which Kipling spent so far away from his home and parents had a permanent effect on his character. The woman who looked after him as a small boy in Southsea was a narrow religious fanatic from whom he learned about the angry God of the Old Testament and the punishment waiting for wicked boys in the world to come. Rudyard was lonely, unhappy, and very often afraid: there was no one in whom he could confide or to whom he could turn for love and understanding. Things

were not much better at the United Services College, but by this time the boy had developed a tough skin under which to hide his sensitivity. If we are to judge by *Stalky & Co.*, written in 1899, the school represented all that was worst in the public-school tradition—bullying, cruel practical jokes and a frightening absence of culture. Yet young Kipling (who appears in the story as Beetle, one of Stalky's friends) seems to have accepted the spirit of the place quite happily: indeed he always looked back upon his schooldays with satisfaction. As Somerset Maugham wrote, 'the influence Kipling was exposed to during the four years he spent at what he called "The Coll" gained a hold on him which he never outgrew.' Thus there was often an element of cruelty and insensitivity in his tales, and sometimes an imperialist tone which many readers have found unpleasant. The case is fairly stated by Noel Annan in an essay printed in *Kipling's Mind and Art*, edited by Rutherford (Oliver and Boyd):

Criticism has not yet come to terms with Kipling: the man and his works symbolise a part of British political and social history about which his countrymen have an uneasy conscience. Ever since the turn of the century, when Max Beerbohm began to caricature him with loathing, he has been regarded as a strident geranium, red as a map of the colonies...and at the root of every assessment of Kipling lies the problem of his morality.

It is only fair that the reader should have been warned against certain things about Kipling that he may find unpleasant. The warning over however we can go on to consider why, despite his weaknesses, he is among the greatest of all short-story writers.

If, as I think possible, great productivity is evidence of genius, there is little doubt that Kipling had considerable genius. Apart from his poetry and his novels, he wrote literally hundreds of short stories, most of which he collected (after first publication in various Indian and English magazines) into books like *Plain Tales from the Hills*, *Soldiers Three*, *The Phantom Rickshaw* (all three published in 1888), *Many Inventions* (1893), *Debits and Credits* (1926), not to mention *The Jungle Books*, *Just So Stories*, and a number of mixed volumes of tales and verse for children. With such a wealth of choice it is not easy to advise the reader where to begin: obviously much will depend upon his own tastes; but he can scarcely do better than start with the stories chosen by Somerset Maugham, published by Macmillan, and entitled *A Choice of Kipling's Prose*. This contains, as well as Maugham's valuable *Introduction*, sixteen stories written at various times in Kipling's life, carefully chosen to show the great variety of his work.

It is this variety of subject matter and setting which, more than anything else, shows Kipling's mastery as a writer of short stories. Next in importance is the fact that he matured so early as a writer. Many of the stories written in India in the 1880s are as self-assured and mature (his enemies might say as immature) as those written forty years later. One of the best of the earlier tales is *Without Benefit of Clergy*. This is a simple and moving tale of a young Englishman's love for a Muslim girl in India, and how it ended with the tragic death of their baby and of the girl herself. It is possible to condemn the story as too sentimental, but I do not think many readers would find it so. The conversation, which fills the greater part of the story, is written in a strange style that some people may find irritating while others may consider it sincere and poetic: it is the result of Kipling's habit of translating the speech of his Indian characters literally into English. Here for example is the girl, Ameera, expressing her anguish and guilt for the little boy's death:

Perhaps...I did not take sufficient heed. Did I or did I not? The sun on the roof that day when he played so long alone and I was—*ahi!* braiding my hair—it may be that the sun then bred the fever. If I had warned him from the sun he might have lived. But, oh my life, say that I am guiltless! Thou knowest that I loved him, as I love thee. Say that there is no blame on me, or I shall die—I shall die!

The reader of Kipling must learn to accept this sort of language, which in fact can be very effective. More difficult is the English of some of the stories in *Soldiers Three*. The three soldiers of the title, Learoyd, Ortheris and Mulvaney, are simple and uneducated men serving in the army in India; and most of the stories are told in their own language, which is far from being standard English. Learoyd uses the dialect of his home county of Yorkshire, which is difficult, not only for the foreign reader but also for the ordinary English reader. This is a pity, because some of the *Soldiers Three* stories are among Kipling's best. They give a fascinating picture of India under English rule at the end of the nineteenth century. Most modern readers will find it a sad and disturbing picture of colonialism—a strange mixture of selfish inhumanity with a seemingly honest desire to improve life for the native population. The reader who attempts *Soldiers Three*, or any of Kipling's other Indian stories, must try to set aside any dislike he may feel for the writer's imperialistic philosophy, and read them as works of literature. It should be remembered too that there was good as well as bad in the history of the British in India. Some of

them served India well, as is shown in one of Kipling's tales called *William the Conqueror*. The girl hero (rather strangely named William) who devoted herself to saving the lives of Indian babies during a great famine may be a creature of Kipling's imagination; but one would like to think that she had her prototype in reality.

Of stories with settings other than India I shall mention four which may interest the newcomer to Kipling. Two of them are based on an idea which seems to have fascinated him: the belief in reincarnation. In *The Finest Story in the World* Charlie Mears, a young man who hopes to become a writer, finds his mind possessed by memories of a time when he was a Roman galley-slave. So vivid are these memories that the narrator of the story (a journalist) offers to pay him for his story, which he believes would be 'the finest story in the world'. Luckily for Charlie, but not for his journalist friend, the former falls in love with a charming girl. This sets him firmly back in his own time, so that the exciting and frightening memories of his past lives simply fade away, and once again he is a very ordinary young man. In *Wireless* Kipling uses a similar idea: in this case a young chemist is mysteriously possessed by the mind and spirit of a great poet (Keats). The newly invented wireless (the story was written about 1904) takes a very small part in the tale, but Kipling is using it as a symbol for that mysterious communication between the living and the dead in which he seems at times to have believed.

Mary Postgate, written during the 1914-18 War, is a grim story full of psychological truth. It is about a middle-aged Englishwoman who finds a German airman who has been shot down during a raid over England, but who is still alive. In a moment of unreasoning hate she sees him as responsible for the death of the English boy whom she nursed in childhood, and shoots him in cold blood. It is a shocking tale, well planned to show the cruel wickedness of war; yet the reader is left with an uncomfortable feeling that Kipling takes a sympathetic view of his heroine's behaviour.

It was Kipling's practice to publish, or republish, his work in books of mixed stories and poems. His last such book, *Limits and Renewals* (1932), contains *The Church that was at Antioch*, an interesting and lively reconstruction of an event during the early years of Christianity. The young Roman officer, Valens, becomes involved with Peter and Paul and other members of the new religion. In a street fight he is struck down, and dies speaking of his murderers, 'Don't be hard on them... They get worked up... They don't know what they are doing...' Paul, recognising the words of Jesus at his crucifixion, suggests that they should baptise Valens as he lies dying in the arms of the girl slave who loves him; but Peter, deeply moved at the

familiar words in the mouth of the young Roman, silences him with the words, 'Think you that one who has spoken Those Words needs such as *we* are to certify him to any God?'

Even the few examples I have been able to mention may suggest something of the range and variety Kipling shows in his short stories. That he is a great master of this kind of literature cannot be denied, whatever unsympathetic critics may have said about him. Here is the opinion of Somerset Maugham (see below, page 219):

The short story is not a form of fiction in which the English have on the whole excelled. The English, as their novels show, are inclined to diffuseness. They have never been much interested in form. Succinctness goes against their grain. But the short story demands form. It demands succinctness. Diffuseness kills it. It depends on construction. It does not admit of loose ends. It must be complete in itself. All these qualities you will find in Kipling's stories when he was at his magnificent best, and this, happily for us, he was in story after story. Rudyard Kipling is the only writer of short stories our country has produced who can stand comparison with Guy de Maupassant and Chekhov. He is our greatest story writer. I can't believe he will ever be equalled. I am sure he can never be excelled.

The next writer we shall consider is D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930). Twenty years younger than Kipling, Lawrence is without question a figure of our own century whereas Kipling seems in many ways to belong to the last one. Lawrence was the son of a Nottinghamshire coal-miner. Growing up around the beginning of the century into an England where inequality and social injustice were thought natural and unavoidable he was able, with the encouragement and support of his mother, to get himself trained as a teacher: and it was as a teacher in Croydon that he first began to publish his work. He started as a poet, but later it was in the novel, and above all in the short story, that he found his ideal means of expression. In his twenties Lawrence fell in love with the aristocratic Frieda von Richthofen, who was at the time married to a professor of English at Nottingham. The couple escaped to Frieda's native Germany, and were able to marry after Frieda's divorce in 1914. Returning to England Lawrence soon found himself (not surprisingly) regarded as an undesirable 'pro-German', and such was the war-madness of the time that he and Frieda suffered much at the hands of people who thought they were patriots. When they were able to leave England again they did so, and much of the remainder of Lawrence's short life was spent abroad—

particularly in Mexico and Italy. At his death in 1930, Lawrence had become recognised by many critics as a major English writer. In the eyes of the general public he was still no more than the author of a sensational novel, talked of by many but read by few, called *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It has taken forty years for Lawrence to be generally recognised as one of the really great literary figures of the century, and one who is at his best in his short stories.

There is no doubt that Lawrence possessed that indefinable quality which we call genius. He was a man and a writer whose impact on the world we live in has been tremendous, though often unrealised. At his worst (especially in the less successful novels) he can be tedious and annoying; but the nature of the short story obliged him to concentrate on those qualities of writing which he found most difficult, namely precision, economy and design. So the reader who finds a novel like *The Plumed Serpent* difficult and tedious will probably recognise at once the power and excellence of a *novella* like *St Mawr* or a short story like *The Captain's Doll*. Yet even here Lawrence is more a poet, a prophet or a psychologist than an entertainer; and in this respect we must, I think, look upon him as the inventor of a new type of story.

In general the short story before Lawrence had been an entertainment depending mainly upon the interest of its plot. At least something of the effect of a tale by Kipling for example can be given by a summary of its plot. With Lawrence's tales it is quite otherwise: the plot is always of secondary importance, and what matters is situation or atmosphere or sensuous evocations of nature. Lawrence is at his best, as W.W. Robson says,

where he is evoking the life of nature: not merely the 'nature' of nature poets, but the ancient feeling of the cosmic mystery, the pre-human and unhuman power of the universe which we may suppose archaic man to have felt, and which Lawrence... can make articulate more wonderfully than any other modern writer in English.

It is the displacement of plot as the chief element which, more than anything else, marks the modern short story as different from the type of story generally written before about 1910. This is of course a wide generalisation; but the reader can test it for himself by a study of the work of such writers as James Stephens (1882-1950), Caradoc Evans (1883-1945), Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923), Frank O'Connor (1903-1966), H. E. Bates (born 1905) and other contemporary writers who in various ways have followed or emulated Lawrence in writing stories where plot is of less importance than mood or

atmosphere. We shall look at some of them later but we must first return to the work of Lawrence himself.

The reader who has not read any of Lawrence's stories will do well to begin with *Odour of Chrysanthemums*. This, I believe, is a tale which shows Lawrence at his best, if not at his most typical. It is a deeply moving story of the death of a miner in a pit accident, and the bitter effect of this upon his mother, his wife and his children. The whole atmosphere and setting of the tale are those of Lawrence's own childhood—a childhood described in similar harsh terms in the early chapters of *Sons and Lovers*.

Early in the story we see Elizabeth Bates, the collier's young wife, waiting for his return from work. As usual he is late, and Elizabeth bitterly assumes that he is as usual drinking at the pub 'The Prince of Wales'. The two children are restless, and the little girl puts her lips to the ragged bunch of chrysanthemums:

'Don't they smell beautiful!'

Her mother gave a short laugh.

'No,' she said, 'not to me. It was chrysanthemums when I married him, and chrysanthemums when you were born, and the first time they ever brought him home drunk, he'd got brown chrysanthemums in his button hole.'

Learning from neighbours that there has been an accident at the mine, and that Bates is either injured or dead, Elizabeth sends the children upstairs to bed, and waits downstairs, accompanied by her mother-in-law, for his arrival. At last the noise of men is heard in the yard outside, and the dead man is brought home. The following narrative shows Lawrence's mastery of dialogue and situation.

The door came open, and the two women saw a collier backing into the room, holding one end of a stretcher, on which they could see the nailed pit-boots of the dead man. The two carriers halted, the man at the head stooping to the lintel of the door.

'Where will you have him?' asked the manager, a short, white-bearded man.

Elizabeth roused herself and came from the pantry carrying the unlighted candle.

'In the parlour,' she said.

'In there, Jim!' pointed the manager, and the carriers backed round into the tiny room. The coat with which they had covered the body fell off as they awkwardly turned through the two doorways, and the women saw their man, naked to the waist, lying

stripped for work. The old woman began to moan in a low voice of horror.

The manager of the mine explains how Bates was killed instantly when part of the pit-roof fell on him. As they place the body in the little parlour one of the men accidentally knocks over the vase of chrysanthemums. The noise disturbs the children upstairs:

Then they heard the girl's voice upstairs calling shrilly:
'Mother, mother—who is it? Mother, who is it?'

Elizabeth hurried to the foot of the stairs and opened the door:

'Go to sleep!' she commanded sharply. 'What are you shouting about? Go to sleep at once—there's nothing—'

Then she began to mount the stairs. They could hear her on the boards, and on the plaster floor of the little bedroom. They could hear her distinctly:

'What's the matter now?—what's the matter with you, silly thing?'—her voice was much agitated, with an unreal gentleness.

'I thought it was some men come,' said the plaintive voice of the child. 'Has he come?'

'Yes, they've brought him. There's nothing to make a fuss about. Go to sleep now, like a good child.'

They could hear her voice in the bedroom, they waited whilst she covered the children under the bedclothes.

'Is he drunk?' asked the girl, timidly, faintly.

'No! No—he's not! He—he's asleep.'

'Is he asleep downstairs?'

'Yes—and don't make a noise.'

There was silence for a moment, then the men heard the frightened child again:

'What's that noise?'

'It's nothing, I tell you, what are you bothering for?'

The noise was the grandmother moaning. She was oblivious of everything, sitting on her chair and moaning. The manager put his hand on her arm and bade her 'Sh-sh!!'

Odour of Chrysanthemums is one of Lawrence's earlier stories. So also is *The White Stocking*, a powerful study of sexual jealousy which introduces one of his favourite ideas—that of the hidden conflict between the civilised and intellectual side of man, and the primitive and emotional side where man becomes a mere channel for that 'life force' which Lawrence thought of as the driving power of the

universe. Many critics have thought that this philosophy of Lawrence's (if indeed it can be called a philosophy!) is not only nonsense, but dangerous nonsense. It can scarcely be denied however that Lawrence, together with his great contemporary, Freud, has done more than anyone to save our education and culture from the dangers of too much dry intellectualism. Over and over again in Lawrence's stories we are shown characters who are clearly symbols of intellectualism on the one hand, and the dark and primitive life force on the other: in *The White Stocking* there is Elsie's husband, Ted Whiston, and her former lover, Sam Adams; in *The Fox* it is Nellie's rather colourless friend, Banford, and her lover, Henry Grenfel, mysteriously linked with the sexual symbol of the fox; in *St Mawr* the magnificent horse who gives the story its name seems to stand for the life force, and it is to follow the horse that Lou and her mother leave the pleasant and cultured Rico, who may be said to represent civilised man. It is fair that the reader should be warned of this continual use of symbolism in Lawrence's tales; but he should at the same time be assured that the symbolism does not, as it were, get in the way of the stories. One can enjoy these without in any way accepting the interpretation of life which their author seems anxious to offer: indeed they are all so readable that it is hard to make a choice. In addition to those already mentioned however the newcomer to Lawrence would do well to read *The Prussian Officer*, *England, my England* and *The Virgin and the Gipsy*—the first being one of his very earliest stories, the second a little later, and the third belonging to his maturity.

The Prussian Officer, published in 1914, is set against a background to which Lawrence had no doubt been introduced by Frieda. It is about a strange love-hate relationship between a hard and arrogant cavalry officer and the young soldier-servant who eventually murders him. *England, my England* is about Winifred Marshall and her husband, Egbert; the latter, a pleasant but ineffectual, upper-class young man, is a typical Lawrence symbol, balanced in the story by Winifred's father, the embodiment of physical and emotional energy and earthy common sense. A number of Lawrence's stories are set in the war period of 1914-18, but *England, my England* is the only one which includes an actual battle scene (in which Egbert is killed). *The Virgin and the Gipsy*, some forty thousand words in length, is a *novella* rather than a short story in the strictest sense. It is certainly among Lawrence's best tales, and should be read by anyone who hopes to understand him. The usual theme is here: on the one side 'dead' life, represented by Yvette's clergyman father, her awful grandmother, and her shallow friends; on the other the dark, elemental life force personified by Joe Boswell, the gipsy. But Lawrence, despite his

over-simple view of the world, was a great writer; consequently *The Virgin and the Gipsy* is not a piece of propaganda, but a work of art, and a story which can be enjoyed for its character, its conversation and its situations, even though the reader may be unmoved by Lawrence's philosophy.

With Lawrence, as I have said, plot is no longer the most important element in the short story. It never disappears altogether, as it seems to have done in the 'stories' of some later writers, but it is generally secondary to situation and atmosphere. As Frank O'Connor wrote,

Story telling is the nearest thing one can get to the quality of a pure lyric poem. It doesn't deal with problems; it doesn't have solutions to offer; it just states the human situation.

As there are a lot of human beings in the world, one may be pardoned for wondering what is meant by *the human situation*. O'Connor himself however (in *Guests of the Nation*, 1931, and other collections of stories published during the last twenty years) has shown how plot as it was understood by nineteenth-century writers is not always necessary in a short story. The powerful effect that can be created by simple situation and atmosphere is well illustrated by H. E. Bates's wonderful story *The Mower*—a story which many readers might take to be the work of Lawrence, and to which we shall return later.

Writing (rather surprisingly) in a magazine called *Vogue* (July 1928), Lawrence had this to say about another writer of that time:

He is almost passionately concerned with proving that all men and all women are either dirty dogs or imbeciles. If they are clever men or women, they are crooks, spies, police-agents, and tricksters 'making good', living in the best hotels because they know that in a humble hotel they would be utterly *déclassé*.

The book Lawrence was criticising was in fact a volume of stories by Somerset Maugham (1874-1965), and it is only fair to add that the narrator in these particular stories was the fictitious Ashenden, who is not necessarily the same person as Maugham himself. Nevertheless many of Maugham's critics (though not perhaps the most intelligent of them) have objected to what they regard as his low and cynical view of human nature. More serious critics have either ignored him or treated him as a mere entertainer. In *The Summing Up* (1938) he remarked rather sadly,

There are but two important critics in my own country who have troubled to take me seriously and when clever young men write essays about contemporary fiction they never think of considering me.

Any man, whether clever and young or stupid and old, who wrote about the short story without considering Maugham would be behaving in a very strange way, for there can be no doubt that his tales have been read with pleasure by millions of people who would place him among the best of all short-story writers. It is true that one would hesitate to think of Maugham as a great creative genius like Lawrence; yet one cannot help wondering whether this is not just because he appears as a man who is notably sane, whereas geniuses (like saints) are generally a little mad. Maugham too has been above all a believer in the short story with a plot at a time when most others have thought that plot was unimportant. Besides (and this is perhaps what annoys some of his more academic critics) Maugham has no message for the world. He does not set up as a prophet or even a psychologist, and in this respect one cannot help wishing that more writers would follow his example.

Maugham's stories range in length from *novelle* like *The Letter* down to sketches, two or three pages in length, like *Raw Material*. Their varied settings (many of them in the Far East) reflect something of Maugham's own love of travel, and their wide variety of character shows his knowledge of men and women of the most different sorts (though his acquaintance with the working classes seems to have been limited). During the 1914-18 War Maugham served as an agent of British Intelligence in Russia and other places. Many of his earlier stories are based on his own experiences during that time, though he tells them through the mouth of the imaginary Ashenden. Telling a story in the first person singular was in fact a form which Maugham particularly favoured:

This is a literary convention which is as old as the hills [he writes in the Preface to his second volume of short stories]. It was used by Petronius Arbiter in the *Satyricon* and by many of the story tellers in *The Thousand and One Nights*. Its object is of course to achieve credibility, for when someone tells you what he states happened to himself you are more likely to believe that he is telling the truth than when he tells you what happened to someone else. It has besides the merit from the story-teller's point of view that he need only tell you what he knows for a fact and can leave to your imagination what he doesn't or couldn't know.

Whatever one may think of this, Maugham himself was a highly successful writer of this kind of narrative.

There is no time to describe any of Maugham's stories in detail, but I cannot resist recommending the one called *The Verger*, which seems to me a particularly elegant example of the 'plotted' short story, as well as an illustration of Maugham's favourite attitude as a cynical and detached observer of the strange ways of the world.

The verger (or caretaker) of St Peter's, a famous London church, was Albert Foreman. He had held his position and done his work well for sixteen years, when a new vicar arrived. Unlike the old vicar, with whom Foreman had been on friendly terms, the new vicar was a believer in 'efficiency'. He was shocked to learn that Albert, despite his good service in the past, could not read. It seemed to the vicar that this was intolerable in a verger; and so Albert was, in the nicest possible way, dismissed from his job. Depressed and anxious at being unemployed, he had the idea of using his small savings to start a small tobacconist's shop. It succeeded, and after a time he was able to open another shop in another street. Eventually Albert Foreman found himself the owner of a whole group of shops, a man of considerable wealth. His bank manager suggested that this should be invested in the stock-market, and when the arrangements had been made he invited Albert into his office to sign the necessary papers. At this point the former verger had to admit that he could not read. Maugham concludes the story thus:

The manager stared at him as though he were a prehistoric monster. 'And do you mean to say that you've built up this important business and amassed a fortune of thirty thousand pounds without being able to read or write? Good God, man, what would you be now if you had been able to?'

'I can tell you that, sir,' said Mr Foreman, a little smile on his still aristocratic features. 'I'd be verger of St Peter's, Nevill Square.'

As well as being a highly successful practitioner of the art of the short story, Maugham was a great admirer of those whom he considered masters of that art, especially Chekhov and Maupassant by whom he seems to have been much influenced. His own thoughts on the short story are to be found in an essay in his *Points of View* (1958) which any student of the subject would be well advised to read.

Taken together, the lives of Kipling and Maugham exactly cover the hundred years between 1865 and 1965. This period, as I sug-

gested before, was the great time for the short story, and the writers whose work is described in this chapter are only a few of the most important. I have chosen them simply because I happen to enjoy their work, and not because they are necessarily 'better' or 'greater' writers than the others. Katherine Mansfield and H. E. Bates deserve special attention because (although Bates is also a successful novelist) they are 'specialists' in the writing of short stories. I shall say something about them later.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) is possibly unique among important 'English' writers in having learned English as a foreign language. His mother tongue was Polish, and it was his career as a sailor that led him to work in English ships and eventually to become a Master Mariner and to adopt England as his home. His novels (for example *Almayer's Folly* and *Lord Jim*), based on his own experience at sea and his knowledge of the Far East, were what made him famous; but he wrote a number of short stories—often set against the same far-away backgrounds as Maugham chose for so many of his stories. The word *novella*—or 'long short story'—is perhaps most appropriate for these stories of Conrad's. *Heart of Darkness* for example is forty thousand words in length. This, with *Typhoon*, *Youth* and *The Rover*, is among the most admired of Conrad's works.

H. G. Wells (see page 135) has already been mentioned for his novels. He was also a brilliant writer of short stories. Sometimes (as in *The Country of the Blind*) these can be seen as parables; sometimes (*The Invisible Man*, *The Time Machine*) they are 'scientific' fantasies, almost long enough to be called novels. *The Time Machine*, especially for younger readers, is a very good introduction to Wells. It is easy to read, and a good example of early science fiction. He offers us a look into the future which is even more frightening than *Brave New World*, though perhaps less so than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Most of the short-story writers I have mentioned (though not all) were masters of the 'plotted' story. Their chief interest, if not their only one, was in the story as a series of events—whether fantastic, as in Poe, or more-or-less realistic as in Kipling or Maugham. Other writers in the early part of the century however were influenced by the great Russian short-story writers—Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Chekhov. Although we are not directly concerned with those writers here, many readers will already know something of their work. It is from them rather than from the 'plotted' stories of American writers like Poe, Hawthorne and O. Henry that the modern English short story gets its character. O. Henry, whose real name was W. S. Porter, lived from 1862-1910. He was a journalist and his stories, immensely popular on both sides of the Atlantic, have

the qualities of the best journalism—good plots and extreme directness and economy of style.

The stories of A. E. Coppard (1878-1957) are like those of the great Russians in being built on situation and atmosphere rather than plot. They are however very English in feeling, and generally set in the English countryside. Although Coppard published more than a hundred stories in his lifetime, beginning with *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* in 1921, he did not have any great popular success. His work was too quiet in tone, too poetic perhaps, to attract large numbers of readers; but he has always been greatly admired by connoisseurs of the short story. It is safe to say that readers who enjoy the work of Katherine Mansfield will find much to attract them in the work of A. E. Coppard.

Katherine Mansfield Beauchamp (to give her her full name) was born in New Zealand in 1888, and died in France in 1923. In that comparatively short life she became (in the words of her husband, Middleton Murry) 'the most remarkable short-story writer of her generation in England'. Many critics would now go further, and place her among the three or four most important short-story writers of the present century.

Katherine Mansfield's father was a rich New Zealand businessman, Sir Harold Beauchamp. He sent her to finish her education at Queen's College in London, after which she returned for a short time to New Zealand. She was unhappy at home, and in 1908 persuaded her father to give her money to go back to London, where she began to write. She made an unfortunate marriage 'to see what it felt like for a book she was writing', but almost immediately separated from her husband. In 1911 she published a book of 'sketches' with the title *In a German Pension*, and in 1912 she became attached to Middleton Murry: these two events took her into the literary life of London, for Murry was well known as a journalist and critic. She met Aldous Huxley (himself a writer of many short stories), D. H. Lawrence, and other well-known figures of the time, and began to write for *The New Age* and *The English Review*. The character of Beatrice Gilray in Huxley's *Point Counter Point* (see page 169) is almost certainly a portrait of Katherine Mansfield, just as Burlap in the same book is a portrait of Murry.

Perhaps the most important event in Katherine's life as a writer was the death of her younger brother, killed in France in 1915. He was probably the person she loved most, and his loss turned her mind towards the past and their childhood together in New Zealand. Although she never returned there, she began to feel a longing for her homeland, and a wish (as she wrote) 'to make our undiscovered

country leap into the eyes of the Old World'. This longing was the inspiration of most of the stories she wrote during the next seven or eight years—stories which appeared in the books which were to make her famous, *Bliss* (1921), *The Garden Party* (1922) and, after her death, *The Dove's Nest* (1923) and *Something Childish* (1924). In 1918 she had at last been able to obtain a divorce from her first husband and to marry Murry; but by this time she was already suffering from tuberculosis. The remaining years of her life were mostly spent in France in the vain hope that her health would improve. She died in Fontainebleau at the age of thirty-four.

It is not possible to give a useful idea of Katherine Mansfield's stories by summarising the plots. Plot indeed is their least important element. She takes some small incident of everyday life—some personal meeting or conversation—and remakes the scene and the atmosphere and the people, usually in the space of a few pages. Very little actually happens in her stories, any more than anything happens in the stories of Chekhov, from whom she learned so much. Like most women writers of any importance she has a sharp eye for details: the texture of a dress, the effect of light on a tree, the colour of flowers in a vase. Children appear in many of her stories, and she writes of them with an understanding that came from memories of her own childhood. One such story is *The Voyage*. It is nothing more than a description of a little girl, Fenella, being taken for a short sea voyage (presumably between islands in New Zealand) with her grandmother. Fenella's mother has just died, and the child is going to stay with her grandparents for a time. This simple situation, seen through a child's eyes, makes one of the best and most typical of Katherine Mansfield's stories.

Perhaps the most difficult task of the short-story writer is to describe scenes and settings in the fewest possible words. This was something at which Katherine Mansfield excelled. Here for example is the scene as Fenella, with her father and her grandmother, makes her way through the dock area to the ship:

It was dark on the Old Wharf, very dark: the wool sheds, the cattle trucks, the cranes standing up so high, the little squat railway engine, all seemed carved out of solid darkness. Here and there on a rounded wood-pile, that was like the stalk of a huge black mushroom, there hung a lantern, but it seemed afraid to unfurl its timid, quivering light in all that blackness.

Here is the London street (from *Life of Ma Parker*) along which the poor old woman, sick and sad, is struggling:

It was cold in the street. There was a wind like ice. People went flitting by, very fast: the men walked like scissors; the women trod like cats. And nobody knew—nobody cared.

And here is the beginning of a scene from *At the Bay*—a wonderful sketch, rather longer than most of Katherine Mansfield's tales, of family life in a small seaside community in New Zealand:

The tide was out; the beach was deserted; lazily flopped the warm sea.

One could go on quoting similar examples of a detailed poetic description: who but a poet would think of a lantern 'unfurling' its light, or of men walking 'like scissors', or the calm sea 'flopping'?

It is not only artistic skill and brilliance which show Katherine Mansfield's genius. She also has the qualities of humanity and compassion which mark the great writer, as distinct from the writer who is only clever. She is particularly good at picturing people who are lonely or misunderstood or social misfits—women like Ma Parker or Miss Brill (in the story of the same name); men like William in *Marriage à la Mode* or Reggie in *Mr and Mrs Dove*. Given the impossible task of recommending a single story through which a new reader should approach Katherine Mansfield, I would choose *The Daughters of the Late Colonel*. This seems to me among the best short stories ever written in what we may conveniently call the Chekhov tradition. It has no real plot, but its picture of the two ageing sisters, Josephine and Constantia, and their pathetic helplessness after the old man's death, is a masterpiece of tragi-comic writing.

H.E. Bates (born 1905) is one of the most famous living writers. He has indeed been a successful writer since 1926 when his first story, *The Two Sisters*, was published. At that time Bates was working as a journalist in the midland town of Kettering. During the war he served as a Squadron Leader in the Royal Air Force, first in England, then in Burma which provides the setting for *The Purple Plain* and *The Jacaranda Tree*; but the most direct result of his war experience was the novel *Fair Stood the Wind for France*, published in 1944—an exciting and moving story about the crew of an R.A.F. plane shot down over France. This novel, and other wartime stories which Bates wrote under the pen name 'Flying Officer X', brought him well-deserved fame, but also some disadvantage in that there are people who still think of him as a war writer without realising that he has written nearly twenty novels of various kinds, as well as the short stories which concern us here.

Anyone who tries to describe the importance of H.E. Bates as a short-story writer must face two difficulties. The first is that of deciding how long a short story can be: some of Bates's novels (*The Distant Horns of Summer* for example) are short enough to be called *novelle* or 'long short stories'; while some of the short stories (like *The Grass God*) are almost of novel length. A second difficulty is that of making any general statement about his work without being misleading: Bates is such a varied writer that it is hard to believe that *The Darling Buds of May* is by the same author as *Fair Stood the Wind for France*. A reader who knew only the short story entitled *The Mower* would conclude that Bates was a second D.H. Lawrence—and this impression would be confirmed by reading *Dulcima* or *The Wild Cherry Tree*; for Bates certainly has a Lawrence-like power of inventing 'earthy' characters and setting them in an atmosphere of emotional tension. A reading of *The Black Magnolia* on the other hand might suggest he is to be compared with Maugham as a master of irony and sophistication. There is a hint of Maugham too in the sad little story *Same Time, Same Place*, published in *The Wild Cherry Tree* (1968).

Same Time, Same Place is about a middle-aged spinster, Miss Treadwell, who lives alone and almost without money, just managing to keep up an appearance of middle-class respectability (she is not unlike Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill*, but is more normal). While sitting in the park one day, hoping to pick up an old newspaper left by someone who can afford such luxuries, she makes the acquaintance of Mr Thornhill, a man of her own age. For a time they become friendly, and she begins to have romantic feelings for him. His feelings for her are very different, but she never learns about them because it soon becomes clear that Mr Thornhill, far from being the gentleman she has supposed, is a drunkard. The meetings in the park come to an end, and poor Miss Treadwell is as lonely as ever. It is a touching little story, and like so many of the best modern short stories it has no plot—only a small incident which Bates sets before us as a 'slice of life'.

The Grass God is a *novella* of some twenty-five thousand words. I have chosen it as an illustration of Bates's work not because it is a better story than many others, but because it is (especially for a foreign reader) one of the most readable. It was published in 1953, together with *Dulcima* and *The Delicate Nature*, in a volume entitled *The Nature of Love*. The particular aspect of love revealed in *The Grass God* is not pleasant. The girl, Sara, is cool and calculating; the man, Fitzgerald, is selfish and weak. Fitzgerald is a rich landowner—a country squire who owns a fine house and a large estate, which he runs with the heartless efficiency of the worst type of nineteenth-century capitalist. His

farm workers hate him, and he hates them. He is obsessed with the idea of improving the agricultural value of his land—especially the grassland—and this is why the girl nicknames him 'The Grass God'. The two of them meet while Sara (an intelligent but cold city girl) is holidaying with her relations in Fitzgerald's village. Fitzgerald (who is married and living with his wife in a small house on the estate) feels overwhelming sexual desire for the girl, and they form the habit of going to the great mansion at the centre of the park (which has stood empty for years because Fitzgerald cannot afford to live in it) and of making love in a small attic bedroom. As the summer goes on he becomes more and more madly in love, while Sara becomes cooler and cooler. She has in fact only allowed the affair to develop because she is interested in the aristocratic and romantic surroundings of the place, and in the money and power Fitzgerald seems to have. In the end Sara decides to leave, having made it clear that she has never felt any real love for him. Fitzgerald returns to his wife Cordelia, who feels no more love for him than Sara did; and to his obsessive concern with the land and the grass—now hopelessly withered after a long dry summer.

Such a bare outline can give little idea of the power and interest of this story. The atmosphere of a great country estate with its palace-like mansion house empty and dead is skilfully built up. The characters of the man and the girl, and of the several secondary people in the story, are cleverly developed in long passages of conversation. As in nearly all of Bates's stories, there is a peculiarly English feeling for seasons, weathers and landscapes, as well as for characters.

Although *The Grass God* can be read and appreciated as a single story it is, as I have said, one of three which Bates clearly intended to form a trilogy. *The Nature of Love* is one of the most impressive volumes of long short stories ever to appear in England, and I strongly recommend it to all readers—including those who may still have some difficulty in reading English. Bates's style is fluent and (like that of most major writers) comparatively simple. What is perhaps more important, he has a fuller understanding of England and of ordinary English people than most living writers. If a student in any part of the world should ask, 'Which English imaginative writer will give me the truest picture of the feel of ordinary life in England now?' I personally should have little hesitation in answering, 'H.E. Bates.'

CHAPTER NINE

The Essay

If you have read Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872) which is a continuation of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), you may remember Humpty Dumpty's famous remark, 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.' That is how the word 'essay' is used in English: Pope's *Essay on Man* (1732-4) is a didactic poem; Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) is a long philosophical treatise; Belloc's essay *On Conversations in Trains* is a light conversational piece; Aldous Huxley's essay on *Francis and Grigory* is a psychological study of St Francis and Rasputin. In short the word has been used at one time or another for almost anything that is not fiction or poetry or drama. In this chapter however we can only consider the essay in what seems to be its most usual sense:

A composition of moderate length...which deals in an easy, cursory way with the external conditions of a subject, and, in strictness, with that subject only as it affects the writer. (Edmund Gosse.)

or

A short composition on any particular subject. (*The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*.)

or

An irregular, undigested piece. (Samuel Johnson.)

Of the three definitions quoted, the first (by Edmund Gosse) is probably the most useful. It includes something which most people would consider typical of the essay, namely its *personal* nature; and it would be a fair description of the work of the writers to be discussed here: Bacon, Cowley, Steele, Addison, Johnson, Lamb, Hazlitt,

Macaulay, Belloc, Shaw, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. These are the names that come into the minds of most English people when they hear the word 'essay'. They are not of course of equal importance. To me personally they are not of equal interest. I shall therefore choose two of them for detailed discussion, mentioning the others only in the course of an outline history of the essay during the three-and-a-half centuries which separate Francis Bacon from George Orwell.

Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam (1561-1626) was a rich and successful lawyer who became a Member of Parliament and, in 1618, Lord Chancellor. Historians differ as to his importance as a statesman: there was no doubt of his cleverness, but he was thought by many to be corrupt and dishonest. In 1621 he was found guilty of accepting money bribes and removed from his high position. 'The wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind', as Pope called him, spent the last five years of life in retirement and partial disgrace; but this does not affect his importance in the intellectual history of his country. Not only is he remembered for the *Essays* which chiefly concern us here but also for his work in supporting and encouraging science. This is so important that I must at least mention it before moving on to the *Essays*.

In *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), *Novum Organum* (1620) and *De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623) Bacon insisted on the importance of what is now known as 'scientific method'. Writing (in the two last-named works) in Latin, then the international language of science and learning, he explained how knowledge is to be got by observation, and not merely by 'authority'. The medieval idea of authority in matters of knowledge was still held by many learned men in Bacon's time. If (for example) Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas had said that all dogs had brown eyes, then that was Truth: they would never have thought of looking at the eyes of a dog to see if it was really true. When Bacon insisted that knowledge could only be enlarged by observation of the world, by the careful collecting and recording of facts, and by the 'induction' from them of general 'laws', he was stating the belief on which the whole scientific revolution of the seventeenth century was based. In *The New Atlantis* (1626) Bacon set out to write something like a utopia (see page 154). The work was never finished, but it has an interesting description of 'Solomon's House'—a superior kind of university dedicated to the study of the works and creatures of God. It is generally thought that the imaginary Solomon's House was one of the inspirations of the men who started the Royal Society in 1662. If Bacon could return to the England of the 1970s he would be disappointed to find scarcely one Englishman in a hundred able to

recall the names of the four great works I have mentioned. On the other hand he would be surprised to find that his *Essays* are known about, if not actually read, by almost everybody; for when he wrote them he had no intention of producing 'great' literature. He thought of them simply as 'certain brief notes, set down rather significantly than curiously, which I have called *Essays*. The word is late, but the thing is ancient.' By saying that the *Essays* were written 'rather significantly than curiously' Bacon meant that they had been written for their meaning rather than for their style. He had (in Macaulay's words) 'a wonderful talent for packing thought close and rendering it portable'. It is this plain, meaningful, readable prose which makes the *Essays* such an important landmark in the history of English literature. Bacon showed that the essence of good writing is to have something to say, and to say it as shortly as possible. So well indeed did he say what he wished to say that many of his sentences have become almost a part of our daily language. Here are a few examples:

A man that hath no virtue in himself ever envieth virtue in others.

Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other.

The remedy is worse than the disease.

The French are wiser than they seem, and the Spaniards seem wiser than they are.

Why should I be angry with a man for loving himself better than me?

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed and some few to be chewed and digested.

Fame is like a river, that beareth up things light and swollen, and drowns things weighty and solid.

Money is like muck, not good except it be spread.

Wives are young men's mistresses, companions for middle age, and old men's nurses.

A little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion.

Bacon described some of his essays as 'civill' and some as 'morall'. The civill essays are those in which he sets down his thoughts on political and administrative questions; the morall ones are concerned with private and personal questions like love, marriage, and the problems of parents and children. Some of the essays are on subjects which we should now call aesthetic: *Of Gardens* for example and *Of*

Building. Indeed it is the great variety of Bacon's essays which makes them so interesting and so impressive. 'I have taken all knowledge to be my province', he wrote.

It has been said by some critics that the political essays show Bacon at his worse; that they even have a totalitarian flavour, 'something', as P. E. and E. F. Matheson wrote, 'of the hardness and disregard for moral considerations which Machiavelli did much to make current in the century following the publication of his *Il Principe*.' There is some truth in this: Bacon was very much a man of his time. On the other hand much of what he wrote on political matters shows an admirable common sense. The essay *Of Seditions and Troubles* for example ought to be read by anyone who hopes to understand movements of protest and revolution, whether in history or in our own times. The following passage, allowing for differences of language and detail, might easily have come from the speech of a modern politician of conservative views, anxious to find a cure for troubles and discontents:

The first remedy or prevention is to remove by all means possible the material cause of sedition. . . which is want and poverty in the estate. To which purpose serveth the opening and well-balancing of trade; the cherishing of manufactures; the banishing of idleness; the repressing of waste and excess by sumptuary laws; the improvement and husbanding of the soil; the regulating of prices of things vendible; the moderating of taxes and tributes; and the like. Generally it is to be foreseen that the population of a kingdom. . . do not exceed the stock of the kingdom which should maintain them. Neither is the population to be reckoned only by number; for a smaller number, that spend more and earn less, do wear out an estate sooner than a greater number, that live lower and gather more. Therefore the multiplying nobility and other degrees of quality, in an over-proportion to the common people, doth speedily bring a state to necessity; and so doth likewise and an overgrown clergy, for they bring nothing to the stock; and in like manner when more are bred scholars than preferments can take off.

This is not easy language for a foreign reader, but if he cares to study it he will see that Bacon is saying just what many politicians are still saying. The assumption that clergy and scholars 'bring nothing to the stock' (or, in modern language, are economically unproductive) is still popular in some places; so is the belief that everything will be all right if only we can increase production, reduce unemployment,

encourage agriculture, check inflation, control the growth of population and not educate too many people!

In spite of the surprisingly modern ideas contained in some of them, Bacon's political essays are probably less interesting than those which deal with ordinary human problems—love, marriage, anger, sickness and death. On each of these Bacon has intelligent things to say, things which are well worth repeating in the twentieth century. On love and marriage for example his opinions were practical and not romantic:

The stage is more beholding to love than the life of man. For as to the stage, love is ever matter of comedies and now and then of tragedies; but in life it doth much mischief; sometimes like a siren, sometimes like a fury. You may observe, that amongst all the great and worthy persons (whereof the memory remaineth, either ancient or recent), there is not one that hath been transported to the mad degree of love; which shows that great spirits and great business do keep out this weak passion. (*Of Love*)

The same careful, unromantic note is sounded in the essay *Of Marriage and Single Life*:

He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief. Certainly, the best works, and of greatest merit to the public, have proceeded from the unmarried or childless men. . .

On this subject perhaps one reads Bacon for the pleasure of disagreeing with him: but how delightful to find a man with interesting and argument-provoking opinions which he expresses so simply and so powerfully!

Bacon is particularly interesting (and annoying!) when he writes about the arts. The purpose of architecture, gardening, stage performances and music is simply, in his opinion, to give pleasure to the rich and powerful. The essays *Of Building* and *Of Gardens* describe in some detail the kind of palaces still to be seen at Hampton Court, Knole in Kent or Hatfield in Hertfordshire. He suggests for example that the ideal garden should be some thirty acres (twelve hectares) in extent, which is rather large for the ordinary citizen. As for stage entertainments, he assures us in the essay *Of Masques and Triumphs* that 'these things are but toys'; but if rich men *must* have them, then let them be really spectacular, with plenty of battles, and chariots

'drawn with strange beasts, as lions, bears, camels, and the like.' As for music, his Lordship's tastes are in no doubt:

Let the songs be loud and cheerful, and not chirpings or pulings.
Let the music likewise be sharp and loud and well placed.

It must be admitted that the tone of Bacon's *Essays and Counsels* is often lordly and dictatorial (no wonder: he had been Lord Chancellor!). A modern writer who proclaimed his opinions in so confident a manner, without supporting them by research findings and statistical evidence, would probably be laughed at. The essays of Abraham Cowley (1618-67) are very different, and it was Cowley rather than Bacon who gave the English essay the friendly conversational tone it was to keep in the work of Addison and Steele, Lamb and Hazlitt, Belloc and Chesterton. Cowley has already been mentioned as a poet (see page 84), and there is no time to say more about him here. No account of the essay however would be realistic without some mention of Addison and Steele and the rise of journalism.

One important feature in the social history of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was the appearance of the London coffee-houses, of which the most famous were Button's and Will's. By that time the passion for coffee-drinking (amusingly satirised in J.S. Bach's *The Coffee Cantata*) had spread all over Europe, and coffee-houses (like hotel bars in the modern world) had become popular places for the exchange of news and opinions. It was in London coffee-houses that the most famous of the early 'periodicals' were born, namely *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*.

The Tatler, which first appeared in 1709, was produced by Sir Richard Steele (see page 187) and his friend Joseph Addison (1672-1719). It consisted of essays and articles on all sorts of subjects, many of them pretending to be written by an imaginary character known as Isaac Bickerstaff and his equally imaginary sister, Jenny Distaff, who gave the necessary 'feminine interest'. The articles were written as though from well-known coffee-houses—poetry from Will's, news from St James's and so on. In 1711 *The Tatler* was replaced by a new paper called *The Spectator*, published every weekday, and still chiefly written by Steele and Addison, though there were now other contributors, including Pope. *The Spectator*, which lasted only for about eighteen months, included some of the most famous of all English essays, namely those concerned with the Spectator Club. The Club was a group of typical upper-class and middle-class people of the time, all of them imaginary. It included Captain Sentry the military man, Sir Andrew Freeport the rich businessman, Will Honeycombe the

sophisticated and fashionable young man of the town, and Will Wimble. Most famous of all was the old-fashioned English country gentleman, Sir Roger de Coverley. Sir Roger and his friends became immensely popular with the reading public, taking the same sort of place in their minds as television celebrities (real or imaginary) in the minds of the modern public. The essays of Steele and Addison, even more than those of Cowley a generation earlier, were to influence the style and form of the English essay for the next two centuries: henceforth, following the examples in *The Spectator*, it was generally to be witty, light and agreeable in tone, resembling the ordinary conversation of educated men and women. Sometimes (as an unsympathetic critic said of *The Spectator*) it was to become merely 'literature written by gentlemen for ladies—that is for persons disposed to sit at gentlemen's feet'. But the eighteenth century produced one notable exception to this general trend in the person of the great Dr Johnson.

Samuel Johnson (1709-84) is one of the strangest, as well as one of the most important, figures in the history of English literature. Without being a great imaginative writer he seems somehow to tower over the landscape of eighteenth-century literature like an old oak tree over a well cultivated garden. His great *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755—the best that had appeared up to that time), his *Lives of the Poets* (see page 84) and his edition of Shakespeare, with its famous *Preface* (1765), give him a place among the greatest of English authors. But to the ordinary reader he is best known as the subject of *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) written by his friend James Boswell (1740-95). This is the most famous of all English biographies—a book which can be read by anyone as simple entertainment, but which *must* be read by anyone who hopes to understand life and literature in eighteenth-century England. In this chapter however we are not concerned with Johnson as critic or scholar or personality, but with Johnson as journalist and essayist. Some of his early essays were written for *The Gentleman's Magazine*, but in 1749 he began to produce a paper of his own with the title *The Rambler*. This continued to appear regularly for about three years, being written almost entirely by Johnson himself. His *Rambler* essays are scarcely read now, partly because Johnson's heavy 'classical' style (sometimes unkindly called 'Johnsonese') is not agreeable to modern taste, and partly because his subjects have little interest for most modern readers. I mention them here not because of their quality as essays, but because of the importance of their author.

About seventy years after the last number of Johnson's *Rambler* there began to appear in *The London Magazine* some of the most famous of all English essays, Charles Lamb's *The Essays of Elia*. Lamb (1775-1834)

was a pure Londoner: he was born there, and he died there, having spent most of his life taking care of his sister Mary, who suffered from fits of insanity. In one such fit she had killed their mother, and would certainly have spent the rest of her life in prison or hospital if Charles had not offered to look after her. Working as a clerk in the offices of the East India Company he earned enough money to support Mary and himself in reasonable comfort. He never married, and brother and sister seem to have lived happily together in spite of the frightening shadow that hung over them. Together they wrote *Tales from Shakespeare: Designed for the use of Young Persons*, which became a famous children's book, and is still widely read today. Charles and Mary were friendly with many of the chief writers of their time, including Coleridge and Hazlitt.

Although Lamb wrote poetry, stories and even a tragedy in the Elizabethan style, it is the essays that give him an important place in English literature. A few of them are critical, like *On the Genius and Character of Hogarth* and *The Tragedies of Shakespeare*, but those published under the name Elia are nearly all personal. They deal with his own life, memories of youth and childhood, and the places and people he had known. *Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago* is a fascinating account of his time at the famous school of that name, well worth reading by anyone who wants to know what a 'public school' was like in the last decade of the eighteenth century. *The South-Sea House* is an equally fascinating description of the London office in which he started life as a clerk. *Mrs Battle's Opinions on Whist* paints an amusing picture of a lady with a passion for playing cards and organising the lives of her friends. Lamb was especially good at expressing the atmosphere or feel of places: *Blakesmoor* is a wonderful description of a great country mansion in Hertfordshire which he had visited as a child; *Oxford in the Vacation* describes the deserted libraries and colleges not without a touch of envy, for Lamb himself had no university education. The comic *Dissertation upon Roast Pig* is a good example of Lamb's whimsical style of humour.

Although Lamb has always been recognised as perhaps one of the greatest masters of the English essay, there are some readers (and I admit that I am one of them) whose admiration is less than whole-hearted. He has faults of style which have been reflected and magnified in his many imitators. If T.S. Eliot was right in saying that Milton was a great poet but a bad influence on other poets, the same might be said of Lamb as an essayist. His worst enemies perhaps have been those critics who have allowed their sympathy for him as a man to influence their judgement of him as a writer. 'Charles Lamb knew poverty, sorrow, and tragedy,' wrote one of them. 'He faced his lot

bravely. He put aside all thought of self and lived for others.' It may be true, but it need not affect our opinion of his essays.

In any discussion of English essayists the name of William Hazlitt (1778-1830) is certain to be joined with that of Lamb. They were friends; they shared many interests (including a love and understanding of Shakespeare); and they have both suffered from the sentimental sort of criticism I have just mentioned. The belief that Lamb was a pleasant man but Hazlitt was an unpleasant man ('a quarrelsome and unamiable man' according to *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*) may or may not be true. It is certainly not intelligent criticism. The fact is that Hazlitt's life contained as much 'poverty, sorrow, and tragedy' as Lamb's—but instead of accepting it quietly he sometimes wrote in a spirit of angry protest. His essay *On the Pleasures of Hating* is a good example: he describes with something of the invective power of a Swift how the ideals of his youth have been destroyed by the hard experiences of life.

As to my old opinions, I am heartily sick of them. I have reason, for they have deceived me sadly. I was taught to think, and I was willing to believe, that genius was not a bawd, that virtue was not a mask, that liberty was not a name, that love had its seat in the human heart. Now I would care little if these words were struck out of the dictionary, or if I had never heard them. They are become to my ears a mockery and a dream. Instead of patriots and friends of freedom, I see nothing but the tyrant and the slave, the people linked with kings to rivet on the chains of despotism and superstition. I see folly join with knavery, and together make up public spirit and public opinions. I see the insolent Tory, the blind Reformer, the coward Whig! If mankind had wished for what is right, they might have had it long ago. The theory is plain enough; but they are prone to mischief, 'to every good work prostrate.'

There is no room in this chapter for an account of Hazlitt's life and the reasons for such anger as he expresses here. In any case it would be wrong to think of him simply as a writer of protest. His most important essays, critical and literary, are to be found in his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817-18), *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818-19), and *The English Comic Writers* (1819); and in his fine defence of Keats against the brutal criticism of *The Quarterly Review*. These should be read by any serious student of literature; but for the ordinary reader I would recommend those more general essays in which he writes about two of the great pleasures of his life: the English countryside and the

art of painting. *On the Love of the Country* and *On Going a Journey* are both delightful; so is *The Fight*, in which he describes a journey into the country to see a match between two great boxers of the time, Bill Neate and 'The Gas Man'. Hazlitt's interest in painting was almost professional; indeed one of his earliest ambitions had been to become a painter. The following passage from *On the Pleasure of Painting* shows the gentleness and humanity which were known to all his friends, if not to his enemies (Hazlitt's father was a minister of the Unitarian church):

One of my first attempts was a picture of my father, who was then in a green old age, with strong-marked features, and scarred with the small-pox, I drew it with a broad light crossing the face, looking down, with spectacles on, reading. The book was Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, in a fine old binding, with Gribelin's etchings. My father would as lieve it had been any other book; but for him to read was to be content, was 'riches fineless'. The sketch promised well, and I set to work to finish it, determined to spare no times nor pains. My father was willing to sit as long as I pleased; for there is a natural desire in the mind of man to sit for one's picture, to be the object of continued attention, to have one's likeness multiplied; and besides his satisfaction in the picture, he had some pride in the artist, though he would rather I should have written a sermon than painted like Rembrandt or like Raphael. Those winter days, with the gleams of sunshine coming through the chapel-windows, and cheered by the notes of the robin red-breast in our garden (that 'ever in the haunch of winter sings')—as my afternoon's work drew to a close,—were among the happiest of my life.

It is not easy to explain to a foreign reader how the word 'Victorian' is used in English. Sometimes it simply means 'belonging to the reign of Queen Victoria (1819-1901)', and in this sense Hazlitt, who died in 1830, was unquestionably part-Victorian. But there is another sense, a sense in which Victorian is not simply a matter of date but of spirit. There are many people, both old and young, who are still Victorian in the 1970s, just as there were many in the nineteenth century (J.S. Mill and Samuel Butler for example) who thought in a 'modern' way. Victorians in this second sense of the word were notable for their seriousness, their belief in authority, their certainty of the importance of England in world history, and their feeling that true civilisation can only be based on a mixture of Christianity and the classical traditions of Greece and Rome. Hazlitt was certainly not a Victorian of this kind: Macaulay and Arnold were.

Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-59) was a highly successful politician, historian and journalist. Many of his essays (some written for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*) are serious studies of the lives and work of great men like Milton and English generals and statesmen like Clive and William Pitt. We read them for information rather than enjoyment; but it is impossible not to admire his brilliance of style and breadth of scholarship.

The essays of Matthew Arnold (we have already seen something of his poetry, see pages 28 and 45) were also designed to educate and improve the reader rather than to amuse him. Arnold however was often critical of nineteenth-century values. In *Essays in Criticism* (1865) and *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) he attacked the materialism of the upper and middle classes, to which he gave the name 'philistinism'. He was highly critical of British education, a subject in which he had a special interest, both as a government inspector of schools and as the son of the famous headmaster of Rugby School, Thomas Arnold. In *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) he did some useful and necessary work in reminding educated Englishmen that their neighbours in Ireland and Wales and Scotland, far from being simple savages, had a Christian culture of their own which was considerably older than that of England itself.

With Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953) and Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) we move out of the Victorian age and into the twentieth century. Both were Catholics and Catholic propagandists, and both enjoyed great popularity in the 1920s. As essayists (we are not concerned here with their other work) they have become slightly dated. Belloc in particular wrote the conversational type of essay which has now been displaced by discussions and light entertainment on the radio. Others who treated the essay as pure entertainment rather than a form for the expression of serious ideas were E. V. Lucas (1868-1938), Max Beerbohm (1872-1956) and Robert Lynd (1879-1949). Greatly admired in their own day, they are now little read except by a few specialists and personal followers. The most important essays of the twentieth century have not been 'literature written by gentlemen for ladies', but serious contributions to the knowledge and thought of the times by writers like Shaw, Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. It is only the last of them (Orwell) whose essays we can look at in any detail: the others, unfortunately, can only be mentioned in short notes.

Because George Bernard Shaw (see page 70) is so well known as a dramatist, it is sometimes forgotten that he was also a brilliant essayist. Most of his essays were in the form of prefaces to his plays, sometimes (at least in my opinion) more interesting than the plays themselves.

The prefaces to *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methusaleh* form a series of essays on the philosophy of 'creative evolution'. Other prefaces (to *Pygmalion* and *The Apple Cart* for example) are discussions of socialism, pacifism, class, and other social and political problems. The preface to *The Doctors' Dilemma* contains among other things an argument in favour of the kind of national health service that was actually to emerge in Britain some forty years later.

The essays of Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), although less important than her novels, have had much influence in shaping English literary taste over the last fifty years. Between the wars she was a member of the famous 'Bloomsbury Group', which included her husband Leonard Woolf and the famous economist Maynard Keynes (later Lord Keynes). *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is a long essay in favour of what would now be called 'women's rights'. The two volumes of *The Common Reader* (1925 and 1932) consist chiefly of essays on the great writers of the past. They contain some of the best critical writing of this century, and deserve to be read by all serious students of literature.

The essays of T. S. Eliot (see page 103) must be treated with respect, if only because they are written with the confidence and authority of a great poet. One of the most important of them is *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919)—still a valuable corrective for those who think that a traditionalist is necessarily dull and narrow, and that the literature and art of any one generation can exist, as it were, in a vacuum. Eliot's critical essays covered a wide field of literature (not only English), as well as religious and political subjects. These, happily, are outside the scope of this book. But the reader who likes to attempt *After Strange Gods* (1934) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) will have no hesitation in accepting Eliot's description of himself as 'an Anglo-Catholic, a traditionalist, and a royalist'.

We have already seen something of Aldous Huxley as a novelist (see page 169) and I wish it were possible to give an equal amount of space to his essays. Most of them are to be found in *On the Margin* (1923), *Do What You Will* (1929), *Music at Night* (1931) and *Adonis and the Alphabet* (1956). They show the extraordinary range of Huxley's interests, as well as his deep concern for human values and social justice. It is almost impossible to recommend particular essays because the intelligent reader (that is to say the reader of this book) will find something to interest him in almost every one of them. My own favourites are *Spinoza's Worm*, *Revolutions*, *Vulgarity in Literature* and *Wanted, a New Pleasure*. It is only fair to say that Huxley's essays are never easy. Their quality is well expressed by Laurence Brander in *Aldous Huxley: a Critical Study*:

To be an essayist a writer must have one gift, style. To have a style he must be a character, and to be a character he must have wisdom. Huxley added knowledge, gained from much travel, immense reading and constant meeting with intelligent people. He had a full mind and an unquenchable spirit of enquiry... His essays are relevant to ... his time and ours, a time of revolution and upheaval, and therefore a time for steadiness founded firmly on unalterable values.

In choosing to say more about the essays of George Orwell than those of (for example) Eliot or Virginia Woolf I do not mean to suggest that they are better or more important, only that I happen to prefer them; and I think this preference may be shared by the ordinary reader who is more interested in life than in literature. Orwell was a down-to-earth writer who chose to direct his intelligence and his literary skill to some of the things that matter to ordinary people as well as to bookish people: problems of war and peace, work and pleasure, and the politics of the time he lived in. His work is nothing like that 'literature written by gentlemen for ladies' which we discussed earlier—indeed it is typical of Orwell that two of his critical essays are long studies of two popular and uniquely English forms of art, the 'vulgar' postcards sold by the million in English holiday towns, and the stories of Frank Richards, creator of the fat schoolboy, Billy Bunter, and all those other strange schoolboys and schoolgirls who have amused English children and their parents for at least half a century.

I have said something of Orwell's life in an earlier chapter (see page 175). It was hard and difficult, but it gave him, as a writer, the tremendous advantage of being classless. Like Huxley, with whom he makes an interesting comparison, he received an 'upper-class' education at Eton (but Orwell was a scholarship boy and was conscious of his own comparative poverty); unlike Huxley and unlike most of the other 'intellectuals' of the 1930s (Auden, Spender, Day-Lewis, MacNeice, Isherwood, etc.) he learned later from actual experience what it felt like to be in immediate physical danger, and to be unemployed and hungry. One of his longest essays, *Inside the Whale* (1940), is a reasoned criticism of the 'armchair communism' of the writers I have mentioned, and others like them. This essay is so important to anyone who hopes to understand what intelligent English people were thinking in the 1930s that I shall describe it in some detail.

The title *Inside the Whale* is borrowed from a phrase used by the American novelist Henry Miller to describe a lonely and inward-looking writer who had purposely cut herself off from the outside

world. Such a writer is like Jonah in the whale's belly—warm, safe and careless of what is happening outside.

The greater part of the essay is a discussion of whether a serious writer can stay in a world of his own—inside the whale—or whether he should busy himself about the great events outside: the political and moral problems of his time. Ought he, in short, to be detached or committed? Orwell's answer is that there is certainly no need for the writer to be committed, and that many very good writers have remained, as it were, inside their own particular whales:

Edgar Allan Poe is an example. Poe's outlook is at best a wild romanticism, and at worst is not far from being insane in the literal clinical sense. Why is it, then, that stories like *The Black Cat*, *The Tell-tale Heart*, *The Fall of the House of Usher* and so forth, which might very nearly have been written by a lunatic, do not convey a feeling of falsity? Because they are true within a certain framework, they keep the rules of their own peculiar world, like a Japanese picture.

Another example which may occur to the reader in the 1970s is that of J. R. Tolkien, whose novels are set in a world of their own, apparently unrelated to the 'real' world.

It is possible, Orwell suggests, for a writer to be *too* committed; like so many writers of the 1930s who, thoroughly *bourgeois* by birth and education, felt the need to be committed Marxists:

For the middle and late thirties, Auden, Spender & Co. are 'the movement', just as Joyce, Eliot & Co. were for the twenties. And the movement is in the direction of some rather ill-defined thing called Communism. As early as 1934 or 1935 it was considered eccentric in literary circles not to be more or less 'left'. Between 1935 and 1939 the Communist Party had an almost irresistible fascination for any writer under forty. It became as normal to hear that so-and-so had 'joined' as it had been a few years earlier, when Roman Catholicism was fashionable, to hear that so-and-so had 'been received'. For about three years, in fact, the central stream of English literature was more or less directly under Communist control.

Orwell's attack on the type of intellectual who, while calling loudly for resistance to Fascism and Nazism, managed in 1940 to find a pacifist haven on the other side of the Atlantic, is angry but not unfair. It is however only one aspect of *Inside the Whale*. Some of Orwell's own

thoughts at that time are to be found in another essay, *England Your England* (1941).

England Your England, written about the time of the Battle of Britain when Orwell was serving in London as an air-raid warden, begins with this sentence:

As I write, highly civilised human beings are flying overhead trying to kill me.

Orwell goes on to discuss differences in national character and to analyse the special characteristics of England and the English people.

When you come back to England from any foreign country, you have immediately the sensation of breathing a different air. Even in the first few minutes dozens of small things conspire to give you this feeling. The beer is bitterer, the coins are heavier, the grass is greener, the advertisements are more blatant. The crowds in the big towns, with their mild knobbly faces, their bad teeth and gentle manners, are different from a European crowd. Then the vastness of England swallows you up, and you lose for a while your feeling that the whole nation has a single identifiable character. Are there really such things as nations? Are we not 46 million individuals, all different? And the diversity of it, the chaos! The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids biking [bicycling] to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn mornings—all these are not only fragments, but *characteristic* fragments, of the English scene.

This was written thirty years ago, but not much has changed. Perhaps the coins are not quite so heavy; there are not quite so many clogs in Lancashire; and we are now not forty-six millions, but fifty-five, yet the description is still true, and so are most of the other things Orwell had to say about England. He mentions a number of strange contradictions which most foreigners notice. For example, 'the English are not gifted artistically: they are not as musical as the Germans or Italians, painting and sculpture have never flourished in England as they have in France'. Yet they have a passion for gardens and flowers, and in literature (especially poetry) they have excelled. Orwell suggests that this is because they love *privateness*:

We are a nation of flower-lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts-players, crossword-puzzle fans. All the culture that is most truly native [English] centres round things which even when they are communal are not official—the pub, the football match, the back garden, the fireside and the ‘ nice cup of tea ’.

Another strange contradiction which Orwell points out is that while ordinary English people (like the Proles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) are not puritanical—‘ They are inveterate gamblers, drink as much beer as their wages will permit, are devoted to bawdy jokes, and use probably the foulest language in the world ’—they have an almost religious respect for *law* as the guarantee of freedom: ‘ Everyone believes in his heart that the law can be, ought to be, and on the whole will be impartially administered. The totalitarian idea that there is no such thing as law, there is only power, has never taken root.’

These contradictions have naturally led foreigners to believe that the English are hypocrites—and Orwell admits that this is so. He admits too that they are snobs: ‘ England is the most class-ridden country under the sun. It is a land of snobbery and privilege, ruled largely by the old and silly’. Yet (and this is a point which he mentions several times) the English are *gentle*. ‘ The gentleness of English civilisation is perhaps its most marked characteristic. You notice it the instant you set foot on English soil.’ Above all they hate militarism: there is always (except in times of real national danger) a dislike of soldiers. Even as I am writing this the soldiers who have the unpleasant task of preventing Catholics and Protestants killing one another in Northern Ireland are spoken of by some of their fellow-Englishmen as though *they* were in some way the aggressors. Military ‘ glory ’, Orwell suggests, is something we have always disliked:

In England all the boasting and flag-wagging, the ‘ Rule Britannia ’ stuff, is done by small minorities. The patriotism of the common people is not vocal or even conscious. They do not retain among their historical memories the name of a single military victory. English literature, like other literatures, is full of battle-poems, but it is worth noticing that the ones that have won for themselves a kind of popularity are always a tale of disasters and retreats. There is no popular poem about Trafalgar or Waterloo, for instance. Sir John Moore’s army at Corunna, fighting a desperate rearguard action before escaping overseas (just like Dunkirk!) has more appeal than a brilliant victory. The most stirring battle-poem in English is about a

brigade of cavalry that charged in the wrong direction. And of the last war [1939-45], the four names which have really engraved themselves on the popular memory are Mons, Ypres, Gallipoli and Passchendaele, every time a disaster.

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